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The Red Warrior; OR, Stella Delorme's Comanche Lover.

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AUTHOR OF "THAYENDANESEA," "THE WHITE
WIZARD," "THE SEA BANDIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE great camp of the Comanches was pitched in a wild and picturesque gorge of the Sierras Charrate, where the waters of the Rio Pecos bounded, all glittering, from their rocky source. The ornamented lodges of tanned buffalo-skin rose thick—like the houses of a large village—in a small basin carpeted with grass and flowers, which had been hollowed out by Nature's hand between the lofty mountains; and the smoke of the watch-fires rose like misty pillars in the still air. The moon was at its full; and though the hour of sunrise was yet to come, all around seemed clear as daylight—so transparent was the atmosphere, so cloudless the sky.

To and fro, in front of the narrow entrance to the gorge, where their eyes could scan the vast extent of prairie to the east, rode the sentinels of the camp; and within, picketed so as to be ready for instant use, in case of alarm, were the wild steeds of the Indian braves.

It would have been a study for a painter, that camp! High on either hand rose the great dark cliffs, with vines and shrubs clinging here and there to their rough, precipitous sides; down them rushed silvery cascades—sometimes leaping off into a cloud of spray, again trickling in light gem-drops down into the mossy beds below. Then that picturesque amphitheatre at the foot of the rocks, now tented over for a foreground, would complete the picture.

It was not yet the hour of dawn, when a wild, shrill yell was heard from the large central lodge of the camp. It was the war-whoop, and scarce had its fearful echoes rung from cliff to cliff of the pass when full two hundred warriors bounded out into the open air, armed with guns, lances, bows, shields, and war-clubs.

And with the shrill war-cry still quivering on his lips, young Lagona, the brave son of their head chief, sprang from his lodge, with his pen-noned lance in his hand—that lance whereon were more scalp-notches, now, than could be counted on the weapon of the oldest brave in the tribe.

He was tall, formed like an Apollo, with noble features, and eyes wherein shone the fire of a true warrior. The war-eagle feathers were twined in his scalp-lock, and more than one scar upon his broad breast told that he had not passed unscathed through the storm of battle. But there were no scars on his back.

"What is the matter? Why has Lagona sounded the war-whoop?" asked Nemahaha, his father, as he stood by the side of his son, whose whole frame was quivering with excitement.

"The Great Spirit has spoken to me in a dream!" said the young brave, growing more calm. "Let the warriors go back to their lodges! I will tell my father that which I dreamed, and I will take counsel of him, for there is wisdom in his heart!"

The wondering warriors obeyed, for the will of Lagona was law to them. By his deeds of daring he had won their love and respect. And again all was quiet in the camp.

"What did the Great Spirit show to Lagona in the land of dreams?" asked Nemahaha, when the two were alone.

"A maiden of the pale-faces, more beautiful than all the flowers of the earth, about to be

"Friend or foe, Lagona knows no fear, or feels no love for them!" said the young chief.

And arming himself hastily, but completely, he went to the pickets and unfastened two powerful and spirited horses—one white as snow, the other black as night. Mounting one and leading the other, he rode forth from the gorge at full speed—halting only for a moment to tell the guard that he wished no followers, and desired that the camp should not be broken up until his return.

The dew lay bright upon the grass-blades and the flowers through which he sped; and the startled grouse, and deer, and antelope, fled right and left as he rode on—but he heeded them not. His course was laid for the Rio San Saba, where he knew that a large body of Lipans, fresh from a foray into Texas, were encamped.

CHAPTER II.

BOUND for the sacrifice—robed for the bridal of death—yet so beautiful!

A maiden of not more than eighteen years—with a face faultless in feature, an eye blue as the cloudless heavens—long, glossy hair of golden hue, in which, as if in mockery of her woe, gay feathers had been twisted—was bound to a blood-red stake in the center of the Lipan camp: robes of snowy white, such as she would have worn at a bridal, in the sunny home from which she had been torn, were upon her peerless form, and rich jewels were on her neck: her cheek was white as the drifted snow, for hope had departed from her soul. There was no sign of mercy in the painted faces of the savage warriors who yelled and danced around her—no hope from the yet more merciless of her own sex, who jeered and derided her because she trembled in her helpless agony.

The fagots were heaped about her feet—the torment was now about to commence. With a blazing torch in his hand, Pekito, a young chief of the Lipans, approached from the circle of yelling demons that surrounded her; and as they became silent, he said:

"The warriors are tired of dancing and singing—it is the turn of the pale-faced squaw now! Pekito would hear her sing; her screams would be music to his ears, for he lost a brother by her father's hands!"

And he bent down to touch the torch to the fagots.

But ere this was done, swift, like the swooping eagle when it descends upon its prey, a horseman bounded through the dusky ring of warriors, riding a fiery steed as white as the foam which flew from its bitted mouth, and leading another, blacker than the clouds of night.

These steeds he reined up beside the sacrificial fire, then he bounded to the earth, and with one blow of his broad-bladed knife, set the persecuted maiden free from the bonds which had been cruelly drawn around her slender form.



THE RED WARRIOR.

sacrificed by the Lipans. And the Great Spirit told Lagona to mount and rescue the maiden, and take her to his own bosom!"

The old warrior shook his head and seemed annoyed, when his son uttered these words.

"The dream is not good!" said he. "The Chief of the Comanche must never defile his blood by mixing it with the mud of the pale-faces. The eyes of my son were in a fog—he did not see right!"

"Nothing evil comes from the Great Spirit!" said Lagona, quietly, but firmly. "He led me to the land of dreams, and I will do His bidding! I will go to the Lipans! If I find there a pale-faced maiden doomed to die—she is mine, and I will take her to my breast!"

"Let Lagona have a care—the Lipans are our friends," said the old chief.

Without uttering a word to the astonished Pekito, who for an instant seemed spell-bound by the boldness of the act—without glancing at the host of warriors, or even speaking to the maiden—he lifted her upon the back of the black courser, himself mounting the other, and with a yell of triumph, bounded away from the terrible spot.

Only for a moment were the surprised Lipans silent and quiet. Then their fearful cries of disappointed rage burst forth—then their bows were quickly strung, and the yell of pursuit heard. But their horses were not at hand; and in a moment Lagona and the rescued girl were beyond their reach—speeding far away, like birds upon the wing, over the almost boundless prairie.

"The Comanche dog shall pay for her with his own scalp!" shouted old Lazaro, the head Chief of the Lipans, and father of Pekito. "Dig up the hatchet, ye braves of the Lipans—sharpen your knives, for the Comanches shall drink blood!"

And his words were received with approving shouts; for his warriors were maddened at the audacity of him who had robbed them of their captive and the pleasure of witnessing her death-agonies.

And they hastened to prepare for the war-path, and to pursue Lagona and his prize.

CHAPTER III.

Not many miles from the camp of the Lipans, at the very hour when Lagona so gallantly bore their intended victim away, an armed force of the most gallant and desperate men in the known world—the far-famed Texan Rangers—was riding slowly over the prairie: slowly, for their horses seemed jaded with long and hard travel; and most of them—excepting only a few led favorites belonging to the officers, and kept for an hour of need—could scarcely be spurred out of a walk.

At the head of the party, beside him who seemed to be the leader, rode an old man, whose face expressed great sorrow and a look of despairing agony. By his dress he did not seem to belong to the Rangers—for they were rudely uniformed, and splendidly armed with rifles and Colt's incomparable revolvers, as well as heavy Bowie-knives. But he was in the dress usually worn by our opulent Southern planters, and carried a handsomely-mounted double-barreled fowling-piece—a weapon which would be utterly useless in savage combat, except at very close quarters.

"I fear that we must encamp at yonder grove!" said the leader to the person last described. "There is water and timber there, and our horses are fairly run down."

And he pointed to a belt of timber in the distance, which rose on the banks of one of the branches of the San Saba.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake! don't talk of stopping until we find my poor Stella, Major Ben!" said the planter to the chief of the Rangers.

"My dear Mr. Delorme, I would not if it were possible for the men to keep on!" said the officer, with feeling. "But our horses are so used up by this rapid and continued march, that if we were to overhaul the Indians, they could with ease escape us. By the signs which have freshened every hour to-day, we are near them, and ought to be in trim for a bang-up fight; for the Lipans are tough—I've tried them!"

"Ah, Major, if you had an only child—the jewel of your heart—in their power, you would not chide me for impatience."

"I do not chide—I only counsel means to insure our success. By another day we can surely overtake them, and if our animals are all right, we can whip a thousand of them!"

"What! with only seventy men!"

"The Rangers never count their foes until they stop to take their scalps!" said the Major, quietly.

"Major McCullough, there is something copperish over there to the south-east!" said an old Ranger, who had been scouting a few hundred yards in advance, and had drawn up his horse to await his leader.

And he pointed to a speck in the distance, which seemed to be moving rapidly over the prairie; but whether it was buffalo or a human being, could not be easily distinguished even by the experienced eye of a Ranger, unaided by artificial means.

The major quickly unslung a small field telescope, which he carried at his side, and adjusting the focus, raised it to his eye. His eyes flashed, and a gleam of pleasure flitted

over his weather-beaten face, as he fixed his glance upon the distant object.

"Bring up the led horses!" he cried. "Let every man who has not a spare horse dismount and let his beast breathe!"

"What do you see, major?—for Heaven's sake, speak! Is it a sign of my child?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"Wait, sir—wait until I can speak with certainty!" said the Ranger; and now he looked beyond the first object to a cloud, evidently of dust, behind them.

The planter fairly trembled with anxiety. At last he again asked the major what he saw.

"Two persons riding at full speed, and followed far behind by a crowd, judging from the dust they kick up!" answered the latter.

"Are they pursued Indians?"

"One is—the other is dressed in white, and looks like a woman; but they both ride as swift as lightning!"

"My heart tells me that it is my Stella!" cried Mr. Delorme; and he madly spurred his jaded horse, and tried to urge him onward.

But the horse, too tired to make even an effort, stood with drooping head, and bore the galling spur without flinching.

"Take a fresh horse, Mr. Delorme; we will soon see into the matter!" said the major, kindly.

The led horses—seven or eight in number—were now brought up; and the major mounting one, assigned another to the planter, and the rest to the most experienced and daring of his followers.

Then, after having given directions to those who were to remain behind to prepare for battle, he led the way toward the persons whom he had seen, at full speed. But fast as he rode, the planter kept close by his side, and the rest of his men kept well up.

As they neared the objects ahead, they could plainly see that the two nearest them were pursued by a large body beyond. The former, when the major's party were first discovered, halted for a moment, as if they feared new foes in their path; but their stop was only momentary: they were soon in motion again, and did not alter their course, which led directly toward the Rangers.

And the speed of those who went and those who came, soon brought the parties close together.

"Thank Heaven, it is my child!" shouted the planter, at last, as he recognized her who rode the coal-black steed, and who also, knowing him, now waved her hand in recognition.

"I wonder what the deuce that wild Comanche is doing with her? He is a deadly foe to us—or his tribe is. This is some new freak!" muttered Major Ben, as he checked the speed of his horse.

A moment more, and Lagona—who had till now held the rein of the fiery horse upon which the rescued captive rode, checked it and his own, in the circle made by the halting Rangers.

"Stella—my darling child!" cried the planter, as he threw himself from his horse and clasped his daughter to his heaving breast.

"Safe, my father, safe!" she sobbed, as she returned his embrace.

"What tribe are those that follow?" asked the major of Lagona, who sat still as a statue upon his panting horse.

"Lipans! They want the scalp of the white-flower, whom I took from them when they were ready to burn her!" said Lagona, quietly.

"By Heavens you're a trump, if you are a Comanche!" said the major, warmly, extending his hand, which the young chief did not take.

"Too proud to shake hands with an old Ranger, I suppose," said he, noticing this.

"The hands of the Rangers are red with the blood of my people!" said the Indian, haughtily.

"There's not much odds between us there—I expect your hands are as red as ours; but we can appreciate a noble action in a foe as well as a friend. You have saved the girl, and we thank you for it!" said McCullough.

"I did not save her for you—I took her for myself!" said Lagona, haughtily.

"That's cool; but we've no time to argue matters. There are too many yelling Lipans in that crowd for us to face. Mount, Mr. Delorme—we must retreat to our main body, and then we'll have strength to make these yelling devils turn their backs!"

The directions of the major were obeyed,

and not a moment too soon, for the Lipans were close at hand.

The party, riding back at full speed, were soon again with the Rangers, who, now formed in line of battle, awaited joyously the approach of the red-skinned foemen.

But the Lipans, when they arrived within a few hundred yards of the Texans, drew up—for they had a wholesome terror of the men whose fire, once opened, was fatal and unceasing.

"I'd give a thousand doubloons for fresh horses now!" muttered McCullough, as he saw the enemy halt. "One fair charge would tumble half of them to the grass, and send the rest off howling!"

The Lipans, seeing that the Texans made no advance, began to gather courage, and as their force was large, they began to "cavort" in circles, and yell defiance.

"They must have a lesson, boys!" said the major; "but we must only make a small show, or they'll all run and give us no chance for fun at all!"

He now directed some fifteen or twenty men, who had the finest and freshest horses, to prepare to follow him; and when they had looked to their arms, tightened their girths, and set themselves firmly in their saddles, he gave the wild yell of the Rangers, and driving home his spurs in the flanks of his fiery horse, dashed at headlong speed away toward the yelling savages.

His men were close in his rear, at least those whom he had picked, and their yells rang out as loud as his own.

For one instant Lagona glanced at them, and then giving the rein to his wild steed, and shouting his war-cry, he shook his lance aloft, and sped madly on to join the fray.

And a cry of terror rose from the lips of Mr. Delorme at this moment; for the coal-black steed upon which Stella was mounted, hearing the cry of its Comanche master, flew off wildly to join him and its mate, and poor Stella was powerless to restrain it.

"For Heaven's sake, men, charge all, or my child is lost!" cried the planter, as he saw the terrified girl borne away like a leaf upon a whirlwind.

"It's worth more than our lives to move without an order from the major," said the officer next in charge.

"Then I go alone!" cried the agonized father; and alone he sped away after his child.

The Lipans, when they saw how few of the Rangers were about to charge them, drew up in something like order to receive them, and while they drew their arrows to a head, and loosened their lances for action, they gave back yell for yell to the advancing foe.

Soon the Rangers were at hand, and on—the reins loose upon their horses' necks, the terrible revolver in each hand—they came! In a moment they were within range, and a sheet of fire opened from their deadly tubes, and then the hurtling shaft, the pointed lance, and the gleaming steel began to do their work.

McCullough's voice was loudest of all, and his form foremost for an instant only; then a wild steed dashed on even before him, and the terrible cry of Lagona rang fearfully upon the ears of the Lipans.

Down—down they went, before the lead and steel of the Rangers; down—down they went, under the terrible war-club of Lagona, and wheresoever he rode they fell back. For, close behind him, wheeling as he wheeled, and charging where he charged, rode Stella Delorme, borne powerless upon the mighty steed whereon he had saved her from the death by torture. Like a spirit, rather than a mortal, thus she rode, unharmed, amid the storm of weapons—pale, excited, wondering how she could be spared.

The Lipans, terrified at their fearful loss, began to retreat; and McCullough, who had lost nearly a third of his brave followers, felt not like following them. But madness seemed to have seized upon Lagona; he rushed all wildly into the thickest of the retreating foe, seeming only to thirst for blood, and to scorn the thousand deaths which menaced him.

But a shrill shriek from the lips of Stella aroused him in an instant from his bloody frenzy. Pekito had seized her bridle-rein, and was urging her horse away amid his retreating braves. In a second, Lagona was by her side: one moment more, and Pekito was a corpse—brained by the war-club of the Co-

manche—and the rein of Stella's horse was free, and its head turned back in time for her father to see who had a second time saved his child.

The Lipans were now in full flight—all save some fifty, who were stretched upon the ground, and who would never tread the war-path more.

And Lagona—all covered with the blood of those with whom he had battled, and stained with his own, from more than one wound—now sat as quiet upon his panting horse as if he had only been at play.

CHAPTER IV.

It was nearly night. The Rangers had made their camp upon the branch of the San Saba before spoken of, in the commencement of the last chapter. And it was well they had so good a camping-place, for they sorely needed rest.

Some of them were bathing their tired limbs in the clear waters of the little stream; others were cooking food at their cheerful campfires; still others were guarding the horses, which were cropping the luxuriant and tender grass by the water-side.

But a central group, standing beneath the wide-spreading limbs of a huge tree, demands our immediate attention.

It consisted of Major McCullough; the planter, Mr. Delorme, his daughter Stella, and Lagona, the young Comanche chief.

Near the latter, needing no restraint—for they would not leave their master—stood his two horses.

And never did man look more noble than he, as he stood there, with his arms folded across his chest—his tall form as erect as the lance which leaned his shoulder—his look more proud and fearless than ever an emperor dared to wear.

"Noble chief! twice you have saved my daughter's life, at the risk of your own!" said Delorme, who had been told by Stella of her rescue from the stake. "I do not know how to reward you sufficiently. Here is gold—all that I have with me. If you will come to Bolsa de Flores, my plantation on the Guadalupe, I will give you more."

"The Comanche despises gold!" said Lagona, contemptuously, pushing back the heavy purse which the planter offered to him.

"Accept, at least, my watch and gun: the one will tell you the time—the other will defend you from the foe."

"The sun is my time-keeper: I have weapons of my own!" said Lagona, in the same proud tone.

"What can I give you—how reward your bravery?" asked the grateful father.

The eye of Lagona rested for a moment upon Stella. She looked very, very beautiful, and her blue eyes were fixed upon him with a look of intense gratitude. What wonder that he, all untutored in the "art of love"—for art it seems to be, alas! too much—what wonder, I say, that he should mistake that grateful look for an expression of love. He did; and pointing to her, looked Delorme full in the face, and said:

"I plucked the white-flower from the fire for myself. Give her to me!"

The planter looked aghast. Had the Indian asked for half—ay, all—of his estate, he would not have been more astonished.

"What!" he gasped—"give my Stella, my angel child, to a savage—to a wild Indian?"

"Are you better than the Great Spirit?" said Lagona, haughtily. "In a dream, He gave her to me—bade me go and save her, and take her to my breast. I have done so, and she must be mine!"

"Dreams always go by contraries, my young buck!" said the major, quietly. "You had better take the gentleman's presents, and go back to your tribe again."

"You are a fool! You have a squaw's tongue—keep it between your teeth!" replied Lagona, bitterly.

The blood rushed up into the face of McCullough, and his hand sought the hilt of his knife in an instant. Stella saw that the storm of his fiery passion was about to break forth, and besought him not to be angry with the man who had saved her life.

"I will do your will, lady," said the Ranger; "but more than one red-skin has eaten dirt for saying less to Ben McCullough than he did!"

"The white-flower need not speak for Lagona. He is a brave, and does not fear the pale-face chief. But he loves the white-flower,

and would make her his wife. Lagona is a great chief! A thousand braves come when he calls! Let the white-flower speak!" said the Comanche.

"She must go home with her father!" said Stella, shrinking from the bold and demanding look of Lagona. "Let the chief accept our presents, and return to his tribe, where many a maid will be proud to accept his love."

"Lagona will not go! The Great Spirit has spoken, and the white-flower shall be his!" cried the Indian, vehemently.

"Look ye here, Mr. Lagona—if that's your name—you'd better sing in a lower key in this camp!" said the major, exhibiting unequivocal signs of anger. "You have done this gentleman a favor, and he has offered to pay you for it, like a man. You refuse his presents, and ask what is not only unnatural, but impossible! And now you begin to put on airs, and make threats! You've got to draw rein, and stop just where you are, or we'll have to teach you a lesson of patience!"

The young Comanche turned, and if looks could have smitten a man down, would have blasted McCullough where he stood. But the latter had faced angry Indians before; and he smiled bitterly, as he said:

"You can't scare me by making faces. If you don't know how to behave yourself better, leave!"

And he pointed to the horses of the young chief.

"Lagona will go, but he will come again; and he will not come alone! He has spoken! The white-flower shall be his!" cried the Comanche, as he called to his horse, which bounded to his side.

"He has spoken a lie! The white-flower will never grow on red dirt!" said the major, scornfully.

The young Indian made no reply: but vaulting upon the back of the white horse, rode off at full speed, followed by the other.

"Thank Heaven he is gone!—his looks terrified me," said Stella, as she leaned upon her father's arm for support.

"I wish that he had accepted my presents," said Mr. Delorme.

"It were better, while you are wishing, to desire that you will see no more of him—at least until we are once more back within the line of settlements," said the major.

"Why, do you think he will dare to pursue us?"

"I don't think much about it—I know he will. He dare do anything: I read devil in his eye."

"Then we ought not to tarry here."

"We will not, long. After the men and beasts have been fed and rested, I shall take the back track; and we may deem ourselves lucky if we don't have him and the thousand braves he boasted of yelling at our heels before we reach the borders."

CHAPTER V

Four days had elapsed since Lagona had left the camp of the Comanches, and his father's eyes were often and wearily cast toward the east; and though, with the usual stoicism of the savage, he sought to conceal his anxiety, Nemahaha could not utterly hide his feelings. But as the sun was just sinking in the west on the evening of the fourth day, the young chief came riding furiously into the camp, both of his horses covered with the foam and dust of rapid travel.

Upon his garments were the rents and stains of battle; upon his face, a cloud of bitter anger. When he rode up in front of his father's lodge, he threw himself from his horse; and without speaking a word either to Nemahaha or the warriors who gathered around, he entered the lodge, and cast himself upon the earth.

"The face of my son is dark. His heart is in a cloud. We will let him rest, and then he will tell us what he has seen," said the old chief to the warriors; and then he lighted his pipe and sat down before the wigwam, and all the rest did the same.

The sun went down behind the rocky cliffs: twilight came, and then darkness; but the moon and stars came out, and gave Light power over Night. For a long time the old chief and his followers sat and smoked, and Lagona remained silent within the lodge. But at last he came forth, and raised his hand, as a sign that he was about to speak.

"Warriors," said he, "Lagona has been opening his ears to a dream, and blood has run because he did so! The hand of Lagona

is red with the blood of the Lipans. His belt is full of their scalps. Their women mourn for Pekito, their young chief, for Lagona killed him! They will ask for Lagona's life: they will come here for his scalp! It is well. There is no need for more blood to run. When they come, tell them Lagona is ready. He will go and sleep now."

And the young Indian turned to the lodge, as if he intended to lie down again. But Nemahaha rose, and glancing from his son to the warriors, said:

"Dreams come from the Great Spirit—they come unbidden, when we sleep, and cannot help ourselves. If Lagona has obeyed the spirit of his dreams, and blood has followed, who shall blame him? If he has fought the Lipans, he has done it like a brave! If they come for his scalp, they must first take ours. If he has done right, we are glad. If he has done wrong, it matters not: he is still a Comanche chief, and no Lipan dog must seek to gnaw his bones. I have spoken!"

The air was rent with applauding yells when the old chief sat down; and the fierce warriors rejoiced at the thought of battle-pastimes close at hand.

Lagona turned again, and said:

"My father has spoken. His warriors have echoed his words. Lagona hears them. If the Lipans come, he will strike them. If they do not, he will go where the Great Spirit leads him—for his dream is not all fulfilled! Let the guards be awake: the Lipans are snakes, and very cunning!"

Again the cry of approval came from the lips of the fierce and dusky throng; and then they separated, some to go upon the scout to look for their expected foe, others to prepare for the battle—for well they knew that the vengeance of the Lipans could only sleep in death, and that they would soon seek for reparation for their recent loss.

CHAPTER VI.

La Bolsa de Flores—the Lap of Flowers. In all Texas, no prettier place could be found than the estate of Varian Delorme, the father of Stella. Through the valley meandered the bright Guadalupe, its banks overspread with lofty trees—back from these lay luxuriant fields and flowery meadows—and still further back, ranges of rolling hills, presenting a perspective as varied as it was beautiful.

The mansion was situated in a beautiful grove; the negro quarters and other out-buildings were near, and all was surrounded by a strong wall of adobes, or sun-dried bricks, accessible only through a strong gate; for though in the richest part of the State, yet the plantation was a frontier settlement, and liable to the occasional incursions of the savage Lipans or Comanches.

There were large herds of cattle grazing about, guarded and watched by mounted and armed herdsmen, and in the fields numerous gangs of slaves were at work. Yet lovely as was the scene, grand as was the mansion, gloom sat upon every face within its walls, except two; for the life of the homestead, the angel of the domain, was missing. While on a ride with her father and a few friends, Stella Delorme had been borne away by a band of red marauders, and several of those who bravely fought to save her had been killed in the attempt, and the remainder, with her father (who had fought with desperation), had been driven back. But he knew no rest until, giving the alarm to the gallant Rangers, he with them started in pursuit of the dreaded and hated abductors.

Two there were, I said, within that dwelling whose faces were not clouded for the loss of Stella. One was the wife of Mr. Varian Delorme, though not the mother of Stella—for he had linked himself by a second marriage to a fashionable lady, artificially good-looking, and possessed of many flimsy superficialities and accomplishments; but never a trace of a heart could be found about her. And though when Mr. Delorme was present, she professed a very sincere, in truth, a very passionate attachment for Stella, she hated her from the bottom of her soul—if she had one. But Mr. Delorme's wealth was her ambition—that for which she married him, and would at any time have encompassed his death.

O Money!—what a thrice-cursed nend it is—how often does it trample down every holy guard of the affections!

The other, who wore no shadow of gloom upon his face, was her nephew—or at least he was supposed to be—one Paul Malerson, a wild

and dissipated young man, whom she had kept ever under her especial protection, and who, through her influence, had been regularly installed as an inmate of the mansion, when he was not away—as frequently he was—on a “spree” in some of the seaboard towns.

But when at the plantation, his conduct was ever unexceptionable; for Mrs. Delorme had determined that, by hook or crook, he should marry Stella; for the intriguing woman could not bear the thought that any part of Mr. Delorme's vast estate should ever go beyond her family. It was reported by her that both of the parents of young Malerson were dead; and as he had never seen them—for he had been reared from childhood and educated at a boys' boarding-school—no one knew to the contrary, even if it were not the case. And it did not seem to be improbable that she should succeed in causing this marriage; for Stella had seen nothing of the world, and but little society visited her father's house, and that generally of a class more suited to his age and taste than her own.

When Stella had been abducted, Paul Malerson was absent on one of his city visits; and at the hour when I introduced him to the reader, had just returned and learned of the matter.

“Well, Aunt Hattie,” said he, after Mrs. Delorme had informed him of all that had occurred, “what is this to me? Mrs. Stella is probably scalped, or else the unwilling bride of an Indian before this!”

“Perhaps not—the Rangers may rescue her; and if so, it would be a pity that you were not at hand to be the hero of the affair. As it is, let me advise you to hasten and collect a few men and yourself set out, as if you felt some anxiety in the matter. If she is rescued, this act will show favorably on your part: if she is not, why Mr. Delorme, when he returns, will be pleased with your zeal; and if she is lost, will be very apt to make you his heir. You can lose nothing at any rate.”

“But my scalp! if the red devils happen still to be lurking round!”

“There is no danger of their being in the vicinity when the Rangers are out!” replied Mrs. Delorme.

“Well, my good aunt, I suppose I must even do your bidding. You have managed well for me heretofore, and it is best that I follow your guidance.”

The conversation was now arrested by the sound of glad shouts outside; and both aunt and nephew rushed to the nearest window to see what occasioned them.

“Upon my life, they have recovered her—see, it is Delorme himself riding with her at the head of the Rangers. Oh! if they had only been an hour later, and you had met them with your band, what an effect it would have had! But run down, my good Paul, and tell them what you were going to do; and if they ask for me, tell them I am almost dead with grief and anxiety. Hurry! I must fix for them, and be as distracted as possible!”

“Jupiter! what a manager you are, Aunt Hattie!” said the admiring nephew, as he left the apartment.

In a few moments after, Mr. Delorme entered the room, accompanied by his daughter, and was met by Mrs. D. with a burst of hysterical joy that was very affecting. Her hair was all *en négligé*, her eyes as red as if she had been weeping oceans of tears, instead of merely rubbing them, and her air that of one who had suffered intense mental agony.

“Oh! thank gracious Heaven! you are returned in safety!” she screamed, as she threw her arms around Stella. “I have nearly died with terror, and Paul was going to rescue you or die!”

And then Mrs. Delorme made a successful attempt to faint fashionably, which gave Mr. Delorme and his daughter more trouble than a reception less hypocritical would have done.

“What shall we do?—she has fainted away!” cried Mr. Delorme, as he lifted her from the floor, and bore her to a sofa.

“Tickle her under the nose with a feather,” said a rough-looking man, with dirty apparel, grizzly beard, and matted hair, and a look anything but prepossessing, who, accompanied by Paul Malerson, had followed Mr. Delorme into the room, though till then unobserved by him.

The sound of that man's voice seemed to have a magic effect upon Mrs. Delorme; for with a wild scream of terror she opened her eyes, looked at him an instant with a gaze of fear and horror, and then fainted in dead earnest.

“Who are you, sir, that dares to intrude thus unbidden here?” asked Mr. Delorme, angrily.

“Easy, old gentleman; easy, if you please! That's rather a rough way to speak to a relation,” replied the stranger, with a sneering coolness not calculated to please the planter.

“Who are you, sir?” cried Mr. Delorme, angrily.

“Why, this boy here, Paul Malerson, has a right to call me father, and that woman—”

“He is my long-lost brother—O John, John, have you risen from the grave?” cried Mrs. Delorme, interrupting him quickly, while her face was as pale as a bank of snow.

“Yes—her brother, old gentleman; so you may as well be easy in your tantrums! I'm going to make myself at home in my sister's house, eh, Hattie!”

And the rude stranger sat himself down very coolly on a silken ottoman; and cutting a huge quid of tobacco from a plug with a long and savage-looking knife, he proceeded to make himself comfortable.

The eye of Mr. Delorme blazed with anger, although he was one of the most hospitable and gentle of men; but the manner of the stranger was insufferably rude and assuming.

“Excuse my poor brother, Mr. Delorme—raised a sailor, he is not used to refinement. Leave us alone a little while. I wish to learn by what miracle he has been preserved, when we supposed him dead!”

“It is singular, madam, that you did not before inform me that your brother was only supposed to be dead,” said Mr. Delorme, coldly, as he led his daughter from the room.

CHAPTER VII.

“Paul, I wish to be alone with this—this person,” said Madame Delorme, pale and trembling, after her husband had left the room.

“Poh! Hattie!—I don't know as the youngster is in the way. He is my son, and ought to know his father's secrets.”

A look of sarcasm sat upon his ugly face—on hers, an expression of agony.

“John Malerson,” she said, in a choked voice, “I ask for mercy at your hands.”

“You shall have it, Hattie—that is, if you pay roundly for it.”

“What does this mean, aunt?” asked Paul—who, bad as he was, or rather worthless, did not like the looks or the manner of the man who called him son, and whom he now saw for the first time.

“Oh! nothing—nothing, Paul! Ask me no questions now, but leave us alone,” she replied, in a tone of entreaty.

The young man obeyed, but unwillingly.

“So, my girl, you thought by a change of name and this rich marriage to elude me, and make your own fortune, eh?” sneered Malerson, when they were alone.

“For Heaven's sake! speak low; we know not who may be listening,” said she, fearfully.

“I care not—I fear no man! I have rights, and will enforce them,” said the man, brutally.

“O John! have mercy on me! Do not ruin me!”

“I will without you come down handily—I would at any rate, if you had changed my boy's name, or left him to the mercy of the world. But I'm poor—I must have money.”

“If I give you all I have, will you leave me and trouble me no more?”

“Yes; that is, I'll not trouble you while the cash lasts. Hand over the dimes, and I'm off like dry corn from a hot shovel.”

Mrs. Delorme went to an inner room, and then returned with a purse of gold and a roll of bank-notes.

“This is all I have—now, for Heaven's sake! go,” she said.

“How much is there here?” he asked.

“I don't know—between three and four thousand dollars—all that I have.”

“Well, it will last me a while, if I don't have bad luck. If I do, I'll send for more; and if you don't send it, I'll come for it. Mark that, my fine lady. I'll make Paul my messenger—I know his haunts—have been watching him for some time. By tracking him, I found you out. But I'm off—let's have a kiss, Hattie, before I go; just in memory of old times, you know.”

The lady shuddered, but did not resist the caress which he coarsely imprinted upon her lips. The next moment he was gone.

In a few moments after, her husband entered. “You have dismissed your brother very suddenly, madam,” said he.

“Yes, dear Varian,” said she, languidly, and

looking really sick at heart. “He was so rude and rough. I saw that he had angered you, and when I remonstrated with him he got angry with me, and left.”

“Yes; I saw him talking with Paul outside the door.”

“How is dear Stella? Do let her come in now and tell me of her fearful adventures. My nerves are dreadfully shocked, but I can hear it,” said Mrs. Delorme, wishing to change the subject.

“I will call her,” said Mr. Delorme.

When John Malerson went from the presence of Mrs. Delorme, he saw Paul standing upon the broad piazza in front of the house. Approaching the young man, he said, in a low tone:

“Paul, I want to talk to you. Come out here beyond ear-shot of folks, and hear what it is to your interest to know.”

The young man sulkily obeyed, for he was by no means pleased with the looks of his new-found father, who was anything but “winning in his ways.”

“Don't you want some money, boy?” asked the man, shaking the gold in his pocket.

“No,” said Paul, abruptly. “My aunt never lets me want for any.”

“Eh! is that so? Then that's another mark in her favor. But if she tries to shut down on you, all you've got to say is, ‘Hand over, or you'll get John Malerson's secret.’ That'll draw her purse-strings—you can bet your life it will. But I've something else to ask you. When are you coming down to Galveston again?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Only because I want to see you when you come. I suppose you'll soon be there to see your New Orleans' flame, Ada McAlpin, eh?”

“Good Heavens! Do you know her?”

“Yes, by sight. But don't get yourself excited, my lad.”

“Are you going to stay about here?”

“No—I don't like the lay of the land nor the nobbishness of the cove that owns it. I'm off for Galveston. When you come there, go to the ‘Arcade’ and ask for ‘Jack Malerson:’ you'll hear from me or see me.”

“Very well, sir.”

“By-bye, Paul; I'll give your love to Ada, if I see her. She's a nice piece of humanity. But don't color up, my boy; I'll not blab any of your secrets. Only remember what I told you, and make Hattie shell out free.”

The coarse man now walked to a horse which was fastened to a tree near by, and mounting it, rode away.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a terrible scene—a fearful battle—and all the more horrible because it was waged, not by the red men against their natural enemies, the pale faces, but by brother against brother—the Lipan against the Comanche.

There, in the wild mountain-gorge of the Charrate, where first we saw them in their camp, the band of Nemehaha and Lagona had been attacked by the vengeful Lipans, who sought reparation for the rough usage which they had received at the hands of Lagona and his temporary allies, the Rangers. And from early dawn, until the mists of evening were gathering, they had fought with desperation—success varying from side to side—and had their weapons been as deadly as their hate, one or other of the two parties, or both, would have been exterminated; even as it was, a fearful slaughter occurred. Nemehaha was stricken down, never to rise; many of his bravest followers fell by his side. But the Lipans suffered even more than the Comanches. Lagona never before had so daringly distinguished himself. He seemed to court death all the time; but the grim monarch only threw victims in his way. His belt was strung all around with scalps; his quiver, filled again and again with the arrows of the slain, was as often emptied; his lance and war-club were red from point to butt; his arm was weary with striking.

And when old Lazaro, the brave chief of the Lipans, cried out at the hour of sunset for a truce, both parties were glad to rest.

“Why should we war about a woman?” the old man cried. “We are fools, and have forgotten wisdom! I have lost my son by the hands of Lagona: he has gone to the happy hunting-grounds, and I cannot call him back. But I will not mourn for him. Let us fight no more. I have a daughter who is a star in

the sky of beauty. Let Lagona take Agar, my child, and be a son to me in the place of Pekito. I am a withered tree; I shall soon fall down, and be seen no more; and he shall be chief over all—for we are brothers. We should know no enemies but the pale-faces, who have robbed us of our lands, and have trodden the bones of our fathers into dust!"

The old chief paused, and cast down his shield and war-club—a sign that he would fight no more. And an Indian would scorn to strike an unarmed foe; such treachery is left for the pale-faces!

Lagona threw down his weapons, and said:

"We are brothers, and will fight no more. We have been fools, and Lagona has been the biggest fool of all. His eyes are open, and he looks through tears; for he sees his dead father and many braves who will fight no more—both the Comanche and the Lipan. Blood has run like water; but it has been our own. The pale-faces were the first cause. Blood calls for blood! It must flow from their veins. Lagona cannot yet look Agar the beautiful in the face, for his hand is red with the blood of Pekito. But Lagona will lead the warriors into the land of the pale-faces, and they will take many scalps, and much plunder, and many captives. Lagona will never raise his hand against a brother more, but he will fight the pale-faces. Who will follow where he dares to lead?"

A universal shout of applause followed this speech of the young chief; and all of the braves declared their readiness to go wherever he led.

Then the old chief Lagona and Lagona clasped hands; and they, who had lately fought with such fierce desperation, moved to a bloodless camping-place, and ate and smoked together with as much friendship and good-feeling as if they never had fought each other.

And that night—delaying to bury their dead until another day, and altogether omitting the scalp-dance which usually follows a battle—they laid their plans for an offensive foray into the frontier settlements of Texas. Lagona was to lead the expedition, and to take a chosen band of picked warriors, of both tribes, numbering five hundred or more.

CHAPTER IX.

Since the bold and daring venture of the Indians, which had so nearly deprived him of his daughter, Mr. Varian Delorme had kept a very strict guard about his house, employed scouts to constantly scour the plains, in the direction of the Comanche and Lipan country, and also kept up a constant communication with McCullough, who, with his Rangers, was posted near at hand.

At night his cattle were all corralled, his sentinels posted, his watch-dogs loosed, and arms placed by the side of every man—even the sleepers—so as to be ready at all times to meet an attack; for he well knew that the red rovers of the plains would seek revenge for the loss of their warriors, and having been once on his plantation, would come again; for the memory of an Indian never fails while life lasts, be it for good or evil.

It was some eight or ten days after his return, that Mr. Delorme was informed by a half-breed scout, whom he had sent out, that an immense body of Indians was approaching.

He instantly sent an express to the commander of the Rangers for help, had his cattle driven into the corral, and prepared to meet the impending attack—thankful that this time he had received sufficient warning to enable him to prepare for defence.

Yet he had but a small force to protect so large a house and so much ground. He had, it is true, near a hundred slaves; but their weapon, or at least their most efficient one, was the hoe. Irish fashion, a negro generally shuts both eyes when he shoots, and points his gun everywhere in general, and nowhere in particular.

He had some fifteen or twenty Mexican herdsmen, who were great on the brag, but, like most barking dogs, uncertain in the bite. Paul, who had some courage, was with him—also one Mahoney, an Irish overseer, who had seen some service in Spain under the Carlist leaders, and who claimed to be as "illigant a soldier" as ever handled a sabre. Four of McCullough's men had been also quartered with him at his especial desire.

All of these were speedily mustered, armed,

and provided with extra ammunition; and when the sun went down, the establishment of Mr. Delorme was as well prepared as he could make it for the anticipated attack: and not a moment too soon; for even in the gray of the coming darkness the dusky forms of the encircling foe could be seen, and their terrible yells be heard, as they rode with mad speed to and fro over the plantation, and around the walls which encircled the buildings.

Stationing the four Rangers and some of his hands in the tower which overlooked the gate, which was the only entrance to the inclosure—for the wall was very high—Mr. Delorme arranged the rest within the mansion, which was strong, determined there to make his stand if the Indians should ever get inside of the walls.

Mr. Mahoney, with a large body of the slaves, was engaged in "drilling" them for service in the main hall, much to the amusement of Stella, who, in spite of her recent adventure, seemed now free from alarm. She, too, was armed; and, being by the side of her father and apparently so fearless, did much to encourage the servants to resistance. Mrs. Delorme had been ill ever since the appearance of her brother, and was confined to her room.

Paul had volunteered to command in the defence of the gate, and observe the movements of the Indians.

Night came on; and soon various bright fires, in different directions, showed that the Indians were using everything which they could find combustible to make light to work by. Soon a rattling fire from the direction of the gate told that some of them had come within range of Paul's position; and Mr. Delorme went out to look at the state of matters in that quarter.

Stella, though he begged her to stay, would not leave his side; and, with him, ascended into the small tower, where Paul, the four Texans, and a dozen or more blacks, were engaged in sending leaden presents among a large band of the red fiends who had made a determined effort to reach the gate.

"Some one must lead them who knows that this is our weakest point, sir," said Paul to Mr. Delorme. "They make no effort anywhere else."

"Yes, my lad, yes! They have probably some of the half-breeds with them that I sent away. But it is all the better for us if they confine their attack to one point; we have not got to divide our forces. Major McCullough will be on hand before daylight, and his Rangers will mow them down faster than my hands can cut cane. Hallo! what's that?—an alarm from the house, as sure as I live!—firing there, by all that's merciful! The devils have got over the wall somewhere. I must get back."

"For Heaven's sake, stay where you are, sir!" said Paul, grasping the arm of the excited planter. "They will intercept and murder you on the way. You and Miss Stella are safer here; and I will defend you while there is a drop of blood in my body. See! there goes fire into the sugar-house; and the negro-quarters are alight already!"

"They will ruin me!" groaned the planter. "Mahoney is giving them fits," said Paul. "Hear his muskets give tongue. He will defend the mansion."

"Perhaps so—if they don't set it on fire, too!" said Mr. Delorme, dejectedly.

"They'll have more trouble now than they bargained for: they've let the cattle loose!" said Paul. "They are wild, and will raise mischief amongst them."

The scene now, though terrible, was indescribably grand. The out-buildings, sugar-houses, and store-house were all in flames, and threw a light as clear as day upon all within the great inclosure. Half-naked savages running here and there; horses and cattle, maddened with fear, rushing and plunging about, bellowing and neighing; the Indians yelling and screaming, and the rattling fire from Mahoney's irregulars in the house—all combined to effect a terrific picture.

And those who were in the little tower gazed upon it until they were aroused from their negligence of matters outside, and pertaining to their own position, by a shower of arrows, which laid one or two of Mr. Delorme's negroes cold, and narrowly escaped doing the same uncalled-for favor to himself and Paul.

"There goes sixteen hundred dollars. The cursed rascals won't leave me a nigger on the place!" muttered Mr. Delorme, as he looked at the two who were down.

"Look out, Miss Stella! Crouch low, or an arrow may spoil your beauty," said Paul, coolly, as he pushed her back; and then, taking deliberate aim, knocked over the nearest Indian to him.

"Paul, you are very thoughtful, and a hero to boot. There's more in you than I thought there was," said Mr. Delorme. And now, aroused to action, he sent a couple of doses of buck-shot from his gun in amongst the crowd of Indians, who were rushing up to cut down the gate. Several reeled and fell, for they were within close range; and as Paul and his men sent in an additional volley, the Indians recoiled and fled beyond the reach of the guns.

"Indian for nigger, red for black, you devils!" shouted Mr. Delorme, whose blood was now fairly up, for the flames were licking up thousands of dollars' worth of his property.

The Indians inside, who saw too late that they had only injured themselves by loosing the cattle from the pens, for the infuriated beasts ran madly to and fro about the place, and kept the foe from approaching the house in a body, now began to shoot them down, and Mr. Delorme had to groan for his herds as well as his negroes.

But suddenly the shrill note of a bugle was heard; and then coming in close order, and at full speed, a band of mounted men approached. Taking the Indians who had been repulsed from the gate in flank, they charged with loud yells, delivering a rapid fire with their "six-shooters," which sent the red fiends flying over the plain. Then, wheeling, they headed for the gate, which Mr. Delorme now caused to be thrown open.

The Indians within, hearing the firing without, and the well-known war-cry of the Rangers, did not wait for their murderous charge, but hastily retreated over the wall in the direction by which they came, assisted by the drooping limbs of trees which had been left standing there, and which they had used as ladders.

When the gate was opened, the cattle and horses, now in full stampede, rushed out, and had not the column of advancing Rangers swerved to one side, they must have been trampled down by the maddened beasts.

As these swept on, scattering far away over the plain, and rushing off where the Indians could easily gather them up and drive them away, the Rangers rode into the inclosure now full of dust and smoke.

"The red devils have been giving you a regular warming! I never knew them so bold, Mr. Delorme," said the leader of the Rangers, as he saw Mr. Delorme leaning on his gun at the foot of the tower by the gate.

"You may well say so, Major Ben," replied the planter. "I doubt whether there would have been anything left me, even *if* you had not come as you did. But I did not expect you so soon—how came you to be here so early?"

"I was out on a scout, and met your messenger—but excuse me; hadn't we better go up to the mansion, and see what damage has been done there? All is still in that direction at present."

"Yes, I saw the red devils getting away over the wall before you reached the gate."

The Rangers, accompanied by Mr. Delorme and Stella, now moved toward the mansion, but Paul remained to guard against a return of the Indians, if they should venture to rally and renew the attack.

"Who comes there? Stand where ye are, all of ye, till one of ye advances wid the countersign," shouted General Mahoney.

"You open the door. Can't you see we're friends," shouted Mr. Delorme, in reply.

"When a soldier is in a state o' siege, he must never thrust to his eyes—we never did in the Carlist war," replied the redoubtable Mahoney. "Stand, I tell ye, or me army shall open fire!"

"Let them try it, and I'll hang you on the tallest tree in sight," cried McCullough.

"Och, Major dear! is it you? Sure to yerself I'll surrender the keys of the citadel," said Mahoney, well knowing that it would not be safe for him to trifle with the chief of the Rangers.

The doors of the mansion were now thrown open; and the major, after giving some directions to his men, preparatory to a chase of the invaders when it was light enough, entered with the planter and his daughter.

"Well, what damage have you suffered here?" asked Mr. Delorme of his overseer.

"One nager hit on the head with an arrow.

sir; but the skull was too thick for penetration. Some of the rest scared from black to mahatto, an' that's all."

"Very well—you may as well try and collect what cattle and horses you can while the Rangers are here, and then, if you like, you can have an opportunity to distinguish yourself when the major follows the red rascals in the morning."

"Thank ye, Mr. Delorme—thank ye kindly; but the ambition of my youth has fallen in the rear on the advance of age. I can drive nagers, but if I have to fight Comanches, I'd rather do it home wid me own throops at me back."

Mr. Delorme smiled; and ordering refreshments for the Rangers, went himself to see Mrs. Delorme, to assure her that the immediate danger was over.

CHAPTER X.

"Hurrah for Jack Malerson—hurrah for the best man that ever packed a deck o' cards, cut a throat, or winged a copper!"*

"Hurrah—hurrah—three cheers for our bully captain!"

The one who first spoke was the lieutenant of a gang of gamblers, thieves, and cut-throats, who hailed Jack Malerson as their captain, and those who with wild hurrahs echoed his words were the members of the gang, who were assembled to welcome their leader back from what he termed a pleasure-trip to the country.

"Thank you, my lads—thank you heartily. Though I've been off on private account this time, I've brought back enough to treat with." And he tossed down a handful of gold on the table. "Call in the drink, boys—call in the drink. Make yourselves as jolly as a drunken gang of tailors till I come back. I've an errand that'll take me an hour or so, and then I'll boozet with you to your heart's content."

The place where these men were assembled, was one of the few low and dangerous dens which may be found in the pretty and enterprising city of Galveston—a town whose growth has indeed been rapid, for well does the writer remember it when one poor tavern, a boarding-house, kept by Mrs. M——, the wife of a celebrated but dissolute minister, since dead—and a few shops and shanties, were all that could be seen on the sandy shores of the island—when Commodore "Boots Taylor" was lord of all he surveyed, and master of a rotten schooner and a disabled steamboat. But avast with these reminiscences, and even those of a more pleasant nature—I must on with my story.

In a very pretty cottage, within sound of the pleasant dash of the breakers, which rolled snowily over the outer bar and in upon the white beach, sat a female, whose age could not be much in advance of twenty years. Her complexion so fair that a freckle here and there could be seen amid the red and white of her cheek and brow—her eyes of a melting blue—her lips full and enticing—her form rather slender, but exquisite and voluptuous. Her expression was of that dreamy, lovable, and hair was brown, rich, and glossy—her comeloving kind, so well described in the *Dudu* of Byron.

The room was elegantly furnished—we did not say *tastefully*. For its pictures and adornments were rather too Parisian for an American latitude. Books, magazines, and music lay upon the centre-table, and a guitar rested against a chair within reach of the lady. She appeared to be in a sleepy, dreamy, quiet humor, for she leaned back in an easy-chair beside the table, with her round chin resting on the palm of her little white hand; her small, slippered feet elevated upon a velvet-covered stool, and her eyes half-closed.

Startled by a rather heavy knock at the door, the color flew to her cheek, and she half rose, as she said: "Come in."

The person who entered was none other than our new acquaintance, Jack Malerson. That he was a stranger to the lady, was very evident from the look of wonder, not unmixed with alarm, with which she received him.

"This is Miss Ada McAlpin, I believe," said he.

"That is my name, sir," she replied.

"My name is Jack Malerson, father to Paul. You know him well enough," said he, taking

* *Copper*, a slang term for a policeman or other civil officer.
* *Drink*.

a seat coolly, without waiting to be asked to do so.

"I have met Mr. Paul Malerson, but he never spoke to me of his father!" said the young beauty, looking rather distrustfully at the rough-looking customer before her.

"Didn't he? Why, the undutiful dog! But I must forgive him—he's my 'precious' only. He sent you down this ring; it's a sparkler, isn't it?" said Malerson, handing her a large and very valuable diamond ring.

"When and where did you see him, sir?" asked the lady, taking the ring, and looking at it with a glance of undisguised pleasure.

"I was up at his uncle's plantation to see him. Fine old uncle that—rich as Croesus—but he's got a mighty pretty daughter, and I'm afeared they're setting traps to get Paul to marry her."

"They never shall—he is mine—mine?" said the young lady, passionately, rising to her feet, and quivering all over with excitement.

"Nor with my consent; for you're a girl of spirit, and worth a dozen of her—I like you," said Malerson, bluntly.

"Will you watch over this matter for me? I love Paul Malerson, and he has said that he loved me," said she, in a winning way. And she advanced and put her soft hand in his rough palm, and looked into his eyes with such a beseeching look, that his bold gaze softened beneath it like ice melting in the sunlight.

"I will, Ada, for I like you now, though I never heard much good of you."

"Thank you," said she. "Will you have some wine?" And she rang a bell for a servant.

"I like brandy better—wine will do for gentler folks than I; but I've been brought up in a rough way at sea, and am a rough customer!"

"The finest diamonds are found in the roughest coats," she said. And again the sunlight of her smiles fell upon the rude shell of his harsh nature.

"I don't wonder that Paul fell in love with you," he said. "You've got a terrible capturing way of your own."

The servant now came in, and the lady ordered such refreshments as she judged would best suit Mr. Jack Malerson, or *Captain Jack*, as he liked to be termed.

And among these he made himself freely and perfectly at home, only pausing now and then to bestow praise on them, or upon his beautiful hostess. Leaving him thus engaged, we will open another chapter.

CHAPTER XI.

On the day succeeding the attack upon La Bolsa de Flores, Maj. Ben and his Rangers followed the trail of the retreating red men; but they had got beyond his reach, carrying away their dead and wounded, and also a large number of Mr. Delorme's best horses. The damage which they had inflicted upon the planter was very great, but such, however, as he could easily repair with the immense means at his command.

Although Mrs. Delorme begged him to remove from a position so dangerous, he stubbornly refused, for in all Texas could not be found richer land or a more lovely situation. And as new settlers would inevitably gather around him in the course of time, the value of his property would increase with years. And Mr. Delorme was a stern and resolute man, strong in his hate and his love—powerful in all his prejudices.

Until this time, he had exhibited a dislike, rather than a partiality, for Paul Malerson; for in truth there was more to dislike than to like in the character of the youth—for he was wild reckless, ill-governed, and none too honorable in his ways. But he had for his wife's sake—to whom he seemed much attached—borne with him, and allowed her to supply him with pocket-money from her own most liberal allowance.

But since the battle in which Paul exhibited so much bravery and coolness, the manner of Mr. Delorme changed toward Paul, and he treated him as kindly as if he were his own son. He bade Stella on no account to ride out without an escort, and suggested that Paul would be the best she could choose. And he also consulted Paul in his new plans for rebuilding, where the destruction had occurred—made him several valuable presents, and in many ways exhibited marks of esteem and confidence.

And this seemed the more remarkable, because he never asked after, or alluded to

Paul's father, or the single visit which he had made to the plantation.

Mrs. Delorme was overjoyed at this treatment of Paul, for now the road seemed smooth by which she meant to accomplish her long-cherished design of his union with Stella, the heiress of Delorme. And she took an early opportunity, when they were alone, to urge him to do his part toward bringing about this desirable consummation.

"Stella does not seem indifferent toward you!" she said. "Urge your suit and she will love you!"

"But, my good aunt, I do not love her!" he replied.

"I don't ask you to love her—think of the property! You may yet be the richest planter in Texas, instead of—" she hesitated.

"A dependent upon your bounty!" said he, bitterly. "You might as well speak a thought as to harbor it!"

"Oh, Paul, you are cruel! Were you my own son, I could not love you more, or do more for you, than I have done!"

"A favor loses half its value when the giver ever holds it up, like a debtor's over-due note, before the receiver!"

"Ah, Paul, I do not deserve this! I only seek your interest. It were better that you were married and settled down."

"Maybe so—may be not. But I have a question to ask, my worthy aunt. My father—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake do not speak of him!" cried Mrs. Delorme, turning pale.

"But I will. He has some secret of yours. What is it?"

"Paul—you must never know it! When you do, I will cease to live," said she, half choking with agitation.

"It is strange!" muttered Paul. "It must be something that much concerns me, or else you'd not fear to tell me."

"Never speak of it to me again, Paul, if you love or even respect me!" she said.

"I shall not, without you stint me in pocket-money," he said, coolly.

"My God, are you as base as your father?" she groaned.

"A little selfish—but not base, my good aunt. I want to take a trip down to Galveston, and need money to keep up appearances. I have a little divinity there, wrapped in muslin, who thinks the world and all of me."

"Oh, Paul, Paul, how you torment me!"

"Yes—like my namesake of Tarsus—I'm given that way."

"Would to heaven that, like him, you'd repent, and mend your ways?"

"I will, my good aunt, in time—after I've sowed my wild oats."

"Beware of the harvest which you may reap, after such sowing. I show you how you may become rich, happy, and respectable, and you—"

"I, dear aunt, will stop bantering you, and seriously think of what you propose. In truth, I have thought of it, and studied over it, since the old man has shown a liking to me. Stella is a pretty girl, and if she don't like me, at least shows no signs of hatred. The reason why I wish to go to Galveston is, to break off with my flame there in an honorable sort of way; for if I do not, she might come here to spoil our game!"

"If that is your wish, Paul, I will get money for you immediately. Forgive me, my dear boy, if I wounded your feelings! I know you are good at heart."

"Yes, aunt, but as rough as a cocoa-nut outside."

"When do you wish to leave for Galveston?"

"To-morrow! I reckon the old man will send me down to buy new machinery for the sugar-mill."

"Well, you shall not go with an empty purse. Only take my advice, and Stella will soon be yours, and then your fortune is made!"

CHAPTER XII.

It was two or three weeks after the attack, when the overseer, Mr. Mahoney, came riding through the large gate in great haste. He did not draw reign or cease spurring his mustang until it was checked by the front piazza of the house, whereon Mr. and Mrs. Delorme and Stella were sitting, enjoying the cool breeze of approaching evening. And here it was brought up so suddenly, that Mr. Mahoney turned an involuntary somerset out of the

saddle on to the piazza, where he lay doubled up in a heap, at the feet of the planter and his family.

"What on earth is the matter? Are you practicing for the circus?" asked Mr. Delorme, in wonder.

"Och, may the saints protect us!" groaned Mahoney, crossing himself, as he scrambled to his feet. "The red haythen are on us again, yer honor! Sure a hundred of 'em were close at my heels! Look, there they are!"

And the brave overseer darted into the house, for an Indian, splendidly dressed, and mounted upon a magnificent horse of snowy white, was seen riding leisurely up the avenue that led to the house.

"It is Lagona—he who saved me from the torturing Lipans!" cried Stella.

"Yes, and asked for you as his reward! He is bold indeed to come here, when he most likely was the leader of the band who gave us such trouble the other night!" said Mr. Delorme, while a shadow came athwart his face.

"You surely will not harm him, father?" said Stella, anxiously. "Remember that but for him I had died a terrible death!"

"If he comes alone, he shall not be harmed. But Mahoney said there were a hundred," said Mr. Delorme.

"One magnified by fear into a hundred, I expect," said Stella. "Mahoney talks too much about what he has done, to be a very brave man. We know Major McCullough to be the bravest of the brave, yet you can scarcely ever draw him on to speak of his own adventures."

"What a noble-looking fellow he is—I never saw a man so handsome!" said Mrs. Delorme, gazing at the Apollonian form of the young chief with undisguised admiration.

The young chief reined up his horse before the piazza, and leaping to the ground, with his bow and quiver at his back, and lance in his hand, he walked boldly forward, and looking the planter in the eye, said:

"I am Lagona!"

"I know you," said Mr. Delorme. "For what have you come?"

"To live in your great wigwam—to learn the speaking paper of the pale faces, to learn how to work as they do! I am tired of hunting and of war!" replied the young chief, earnestly.

"Your wish sounds good, but I doubt your will!" said the planter. "Were you not here with a band to attack me and burn my buildings, a few days ago?"

"Lagona would not lie to save his life. He was here! He came to carry off the daughter of the pale-faced chief. But he is sorry for it, and will not try again."

"How may I know that?" asked the planter, who was a man, and could not but be pleased with the honest candor of the fearless chief.

"I pass my word. I do not know how to lie!"

"How may I feel assured that you do not seek an entrance into my house with a design to admit your murderous band when I am asleep?"

"Lagona is not a coward. The house and all that the pale-faced chief owns is as safe while Lagona is here, as if the Great Spirit, robed in the garments of the Sun, stood guard over it! If the pale-faced chief reads treachery in the face of Lagona, let him kill him, not as a warrior, but as a dog."

"If I let you live with me and work with my men, will you promise not to try to steal my daughter?"

"Lagona will promise. He will look upon her as he does upon the stars which are very beautiful, but a great way off."

"There is a strange request, and it is imprudent in me to grant it, but I will trust you," said Mr. Delorme, after a moment's hesitation. And he called a servant and bade him take care of Lagona's horse.

"Take these and keep them until I ask for them," said Lagona, handing his knife, hatchet, lance, bow and arrows, to the planter.

"This looks well," said Mr. Delorme; "I really believe now that Lagona is in earnest?"

"I am not a child," said the Comanche, quietly. "I only say what I mean!"

"I make you welcome to my house—you have courage, and honor goes hand in hand with that! You shall study the arts we know, and my daughter shall be one of your teachers," said Delorme, carried away by the nobler impulses of his nature.

"I am not strong enough to learn of her—let me learn of those whom I do not love," said Lagona, who had but once glanced at her during this conversation. And then, though the red blood darkened his cheek, he saw no sympathetic glow in hers.

"You are a noble fellow—your confidence in me shall not be misplaced. Come with me," said the planter, leading the way into the house.

Scarcely had he and Lagona entered, when by another avenue, Mr. Mahoney, came out.

"Jabers—the master will be murdered entirely!" said he. "He's in there aforeninst the side-board, wid the brandy in his hand! I saw him offer the red nager a drink, and he wouldn't take it, and said fire-wather was bad!"

"And he spoke the truth. He shows more sense than some white men in his refusal," said Stella.

"That's thrue so far as it goes, me lady—but d'ye see, weren't it for the knowledge o' the bit o' comfort there's in a shray glass now an' then, divil the bit would we white men take it!"

"Take your lessons from this Indian, and beware how you offend him, then!" said Stella.

"Is he goin' to live wid the master?"

"Yes, he is."

"Och—mil-dieu! It's time that Patrick Mahoney asked for his walkin'-papers, or he'll be less a scalp to his head one o' these fine mornings!"

"Do not fear—I can influence him, and you shall be in no danger, always provided you do not affront him!"

"Faith, lady, I'll be as careful as if I was travelin' over a road paved wid eggs, when I'm in his company!"

"Do so, and you are safe."

"Thank ye, lady! While I'm under the protection of yer innocence and beauty, I'm as safe as if the angels gave me one of their wings for a counterpane. I'm the better contented, now, and wishing you pleasant drames and no disturbance I'll bid ye an early good-night."

The overseer now betook himself to his own quarters, evidently liking to increase, so far as he could, the distance between him and his dread, the chief of the Comanches.

Stella and Mrs. Delorme, laughing at his eagerness to leave the locality, entered the house, where we will leave them, while we turn our attention to another quarter.

CHAPTER XIII.

Paul Malerson, with a pocket full of that artificial which only is needed to establish one's gentility in our model Republic, had arrived, registered his name, and just been ushered into the best room of the best hotel in Galveston, when a servant announced a "gentleman" who wished to see him on particular business. And at the same time the servant permitted Captain Jack Malerson to enter the room.

"Ah, Paul, how are you? Been expecting you for some time. So has Ada—told her you'd be here soon—said I'd look out for you, and here I am!" cried the captain, as he came in.

"I'm much obliged to you for your unnecessary care, sir—I almost feel old enough to take care of myself—the more especially that I have never until now, known anything of parental care!" said Paul, stiffly.

"No fault of mine, lad—no fault of mine, as you will learn by-and-by. But it was necessary that I should see you the moment you arrived, for I have been working for you, packing your cards all night to play a winning game—d'ye hear?"

"I hear sir, but I do not understand."

"No? Then I'll explain. You see, I knew you loved little Ada, who is a trump of a girl, and loves you harder than a man can kick, and as I had a diamond ring worth a cool thousand that I didn't care much for, so I took it to her and told her you sent it! Didn't I do it up brown? You're all right in her books now!"

"Yes—just at the time when I want to be out of them. I came down here on purpose to break off with her!"

"Whew! What does this mean?"

"My aunt has arranged matters so that it will be to my interest to marry Stella Delorme."

"What, the old planter's daughter?"

"Yes."

"He is rich, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, very—and she will be his heiress!"

"Got much by him in hard cash, jewelry, plate, and the likes of that?"

"Yes, sir, a great deal; but why do you ask that?"

"Oh, for no very particular reason, only I was thinking of your interest, d'ye see? I don't want to see you tangle yourself in any chains but golden ones. A man is a fool if he does, cov-a-days! But we'll have time to think of this matter and talk it over before you go to the country again. Meantime, when you call on Ada, don't let on but that you sent her the diamond. And if you get short o' dimes, come to me at the Arcade and ask for more, and you'll find 'em all ready for you!"

"Thank you, sir—if I need them I'll call."

And with this understanding, Mr. Jack Malerson left his son's room.

"Here's the captain, once more! Long life and rich deals to his hand!" was the cry of Sandy Spicer, the lieutenant of Malerson's gang, when Jack, returning from his recent visit entered the room, or rather den of smoke and whisky fumes, which they occupied as headquarters.

They were a hard-looking set of customers. Men of nearly every nation and hue except black, for they were murderers and thieves of a class too gentlemanly, to be found associating with "niggers." Some were dressed in the usual black-leg style, as fancifully as they could afford—others rough enough to suit the most romantic maiden's idea of a ruffian or a cut-throat.

"Well, lads," said Malerson, as he entered, "Ain't you almost tired of doing nothing?"

"That we are, captain!" said Sandy Spicer, whose red hair and choleric face indicated a peppery nature. "My sword, to use the language of the immortal poet, 'tho' true and trusty, for want of use is growing rusty.' (!) For sword read bowie-knife, and you'll be O. K. Have you anything ahead, Captain Malerson?"

"Yes—a big haul, if we manage it right. There's a chap up country who is as rich as a bank, or more so—got lots of money and plate on hand, and any quantity of niggers and horses. I mean to take the whole band, disguised as Indians, and clean him out! He's got a daughter as pretty as all out-doors, and she shall be mine—his wife isn't bad-lookin'. I guess I'll let you draw lots for her. Once I'd have cut my heart out for her, but that time has gone by!"

The gang received this announcement with cheers.

"When are we to start? I hunger for action. My heart's in arms and eager for the try, as the fellow said, when he smelt the eels a cockin'!" cried the poetic Mr. Spicer.

"Soon as we can—stay in all of you. I've a little errand to do, and then I'll be back and lay my plans. And mind, boys, no drinking now—we can make a big haul if we keep sober and work the game up right!"

"We'll be as sober as expectant acirs before the will is read!" said Mr. Spicer.

"Paul is here," said Captain Jack Malerson, to Ada McAlphin, as he entered her room a short time after he left his men. "He has come here to break off with you!"

"Then he has come to die!" said Ada, while her fine eyes flashed angrily.

"Not so fast, my beauty—not so fast. I came to caution you about that very thing, for I know the grit that is in you, and you'll stick at nothing if you're once roused! I am going to fix matters in a better way. I'll put that girl out of his way, if you'll be easy with him!"

"Will you—oh, bless you, will you?" cried Ada, clasping his hands.

"Yee, girl, yes. I will fix her so that he'd as soon marry a Comanche squaw as her!"

"Oh, how shall I trust you?"

"You'll trust me because I'm his father, and I like you well enough to want you for a daughter."

"I will trust you!" said she.

"That's right. But now Ada, don't you tell him of this second visit, though he knows of the first; and whatever you may hear about the Delormes, keep it to yourself."

"I promise that. But is the girl whom he wishes to marry a Delorme?"

"Yes, her name is Stella Delorme—but I dare not stay here longer, for I expect Paul

will be along soon. Ah! there he comes down the street—I must slip out by the back door, as he comes in at the front."

Ada gave her visitor directions how to leave the house unseen; and a few moments after he left, Paul entered.

CHAPTER XIV.

When Paul entered, Ada, as she usually did, bounded to his arms and imprinted hundreds of kisses upon his lips. He gently, but rather coldly returned her fervent caresses, and then led her back to the sofa from which she had sprung.

"Sit down, dear Ada," said he, "I want to talk to you."

"I am all ears; go on, dear Paul," said she, retaining his hand in hers.

He seemed at a loss what to say, for the subject that was uppermost in his mind was an embarrassing one.

"Well, Paul, what is it? Why do you not tell me what you wished to say?" said Ada, smiling at his embarrassment.

"I am—am very poor, Ada!" said Paul, at last, with hesitation in tone as well as manner.

"And therefore quite a criminal in the eyes of the world, yet not in mine. But I am very sorry for you Paul. What can I do for you? I'm not very rich in this world's goods, but the treasury of my affection is full and overflowing!"

"Ada, you are a good girl. You know that I love you!"

"Once I thought you did, Paul. But now I know you do not. You are now racking your brain for a plausible excuse to cast me off. But you cannot find one—you cannot find one! You say that you are poor—what of that? Have I asked you for money? My love cannot be measured by bars of gold, and bars of iron cannot imprison it!"

Paul trembled with emotion, but was silent.

"Why do you not reply to me, Paul?" continued Ada. "Come, I will give you a theme for conversation. Suppose we speak of *Stella Delorme*!"

"Heavens! do you know her?"

"As well as I wish to! She is very pretty, Paul. Do you love her?"

"No, Ada, no; as God is my judge I do not! But I am poor, and she is an heiress!"

"And so you tip up the pleasure-cup of love, and fill it with gold—bitter, indigestible gold!"

"O Ada, I do not know what to do! I do love you; but you need comforts, luxuries, which, while I am penniless, I cannot give to you! Let me marry her; let her have my hand, while you retain my heart!"

"Paul Malerson," cried Ada, while her color rose, and her eyes flashed, "do not destroy all my dream! Do not change my love into hate; for your own sake do not! Do not make me despise you! Do you think that I could let you come illegally to my arms, while you are legally bound to another? No, Paul Malerson, do not thus taunt and insult me!"

"Ada! Ada! I do not know what to do!"

"Be just—be just to yourself and that will be justice to me! I did not seek you out. I was content, when you found me. I ask no other lot. But in you I thought that I had found a young, pure, fresh heart, untainted by the corrupting atmosphere of the world! I loved you, hid away, and kept myself aloof from the world for your sake. And this—this is my reward! Farewell—Paul Malerson, FAREWELL!"

And as she spoke, she drew a dagger from her bosom and raised it above her breast. Her cheek was ghastly pale—she was breathless, and every nerve was iced into firmness—a moment more, and that bright steel had opened Death's pathway to her heart. But Paul caught her hand ere it descended, wrested the dagger away, and threw it through the window beyond her reach.

"Ada—Ada, would you destroy yourself?" he cried.

"Yes, soul and body!" she gasped, and sunk fainting into his arms.

"This is love—I cannot give her up!" he muttered, as he laid her gently down upon the sofa, and hastened to call her maid to aid in her recovery.

CHAPTER XV.

Two weeks are, when counted off into hours by the tongue of Jay, but brief, very

brief breaths of time! Yet, in lengthened by the sigh of sorrow, or the long-drawn moan of pain, how measureless and unending do they seem.

For two weeks had Lagona dwelt beneath the roof of Varian Delorme. And during this time, the distrustful planter had tried, by many, and even by harsh and cruel means, to test the sincerity of the young Comanche's professed desire to learn the arts and ways of the pale-faces.

He had sent him to the fields with his hoe in his hand. And Lagona went and did what he had never done before—worked! He had made him perform many a menial service; and though the throbbing heart of the proud young chief almost broke from its bonds, he persevered, bowed his head, and obeyed! He had endeavored to throw him alone into the company of Stella, while he kept a secret watch upon him, to see if Lagona did not, in deed, intend to try to carry her off.

But though the young chief trembled when he heard her voice, he would not raise his eyes to look upon her; though fearless of a thousand foes, he seemed afraid, even of himself, when in her presence.

But another peril to an unsophisticated heart was in that house for him. Mrs. Delorme—as I believe I have elsewhere said—was, for her age, a very beautiful and attractive woman; and her art and knowledge of the world rendered her capable of turning every point to advantage. From the hour when he came to the plantation, Mrs. Delorme had been madly infatuated with him; so much so, that she could hardly avoid attracting the observation of others. But Lagona did not appear to heed her attentions. She made him many presents, but he carelessly threw them aside; and when she spoke to him, only answered in a monosyllable and turned away. This very indifference only seemed to fan the flame which burned in her heart. But if Lagona was really aware of her preference, he made not the slightest recognition of the fact—a matter which much pleased Stella, who, from the moment when Mrs. Delorme had expressed her admiration of the young chief's person, had noticed her conduct, and observed her evident partiality towards him. And though no tell-tale, yet the honor of her father was too closely held in her heart, for her not to feel anxious that it should not be stained by imprudence, not to say guilt, on the part of her step-mother.

It was night, about the time stated in the opening of this chapter, and Lagona, who had been kept at work all day, was seated near Mrs. Delorme, who was asking him many questions regarding his tribe—their habits and manner of living. These questions, although by no means pleasing to the taciturn chief, were answered briefly and respectfully by Lagona. As he spoke of his mountain home, frightened with silvery cascades and glittering streams—rendered beautiful with flowers and mosses, and grand with grey rocks and dark, green pines, his eye flashed like that of the eagle in its native sky; and he seemed once more a tameless monarch there.

"O, how I should like to be there—to ride like the wind over hill and dale—to hunt the bounding antelope!" cried Mrs. Delorme.

"No place for a squaw! Her place is over the pot, in the wigwam!" said Lagona, in a tone of quiet contempt, which would have stung some women to the soul, but she was too much blinded by her infatuation to notice it.

It is not fated for us to know what reply she would have made to this characteristic, if not gallant, speech, for one of the Mexican herdsmen, who had been belated on the plains, rushed into the presence of Mr. Delorme and told him that Indians were close at hand; so close that they had pressed his utmost speed, and nearly succeeded in reaching the gate and entering when he did.

"What means this?" cried Mr. Delorme, turning upon Lagona. "I thought that you said while you were here no Indians would trouble me!"

"Neither the Comanche nor the Lipan will!" said Lagona. "Give me my weapons, I will go and see who these are!"

"Trust you with weapons, when you may use them against myself? I am not quite a fool!"

"Pale-faced father—I forgive you! I will go without them!" said the young chief, with a mournful haughtiness, and he left the room.

"O Mr. Delorme, you cruelly wrong the noble fellow—I would stake my life upon his fidelity!" cried Mrs. Delorme.

"You might, madam. I would not!" said Mr. Delorme, coolly. "You will oblige me by minding your own business!"

The whole place was now in alarm. The herdsmen and blacks hurried like frightened sheep to the mansion. Mr. Mahoney, who was quite brave within walls, commenced mustering his forces in the main hall. Paul Malerson, who had returned from Galveston, had hurried to his old station, the tower over the gate, taking with him a half-dozen or more men, whom he found with arms in their hands.

The yells of the foe could be heard with fearful distinctness as Mr. Delorme stepped out upon the piazza; and he had been there but a few moments, when he heard the crashing of battering-rams, or something of the kind, at the gate. But in a moment or two after, he heard firing there, and knew that Paul had gained his old position. He was occupied a short time in seeing that the men who had hurried to the house were made ready for action. Then he returned to the piazza where his terrified wife stood with Stella, listening to the sounds beyond the wall.

"Where is that cursed Indian?" he cried. "Gone, I suppose, to help his mates to butcher those who fed him!" he added, bitterly.

"Pale-face, the cursed Indian is here!" said Lagona. "The men who come to attack you are not Indians, but white men in disguise!"

The sudden appearance of Lagona by his side, and the calmness with which he replied to the insulting words of Mr. Delorme, so unnerved the latter, that for a moment he was speechless.

"How do you know they are white men?" he asked, at last.

"I have been among them," replied Lagona. "Is this a red man's scalp?" he asked, and he shook a dripping scalp, fresh from the head of some red-haired white man, before Mr. Delorme's face.

"Heavens! where and how did you take that?"

"From its owner, with his own knife, for you would not let me have my weapons! I have been outside the wall."

"Forgive me, Lagona, I have acted like a dog toward you," said Mr. Delorme.

"I knew you had wronged him," cried Mrs. Delorme, in triumph.

"We've no time for talking now—they are many, and strong with arms. We must fight," said Lagona. "Give me some men, and we will climb the wall and take them in the back. I'll make them know what real Indian is."

"Your plan is good, and I will go with you," said Mr. Delorme, hastening to get picked men for the duty.

"Do not put your life in peril," said Mrs. Delorme, in a low tone, to Lagona.

"Death is the playmate of warriors and a scare-crow to squaws," said Lagona; as he went after his own arms.

O Heavens, what a hero! said the infatuated woman, not heeding the presence of Stella.

Meanwhile, the fight at the gate had been very hot. The assailing party, with some logs which they had procured, had endeavored, repeatedly, to batter in the strong gate, led on by a desperate man, who in vain endeavored to make his voice sound like that of an Indian. Another had been by his side at first, as bold as he, a red-faced, red-haired man; but in one of the first charges, and before the men in the tower had opened a steady fire, he had fallen dead, with a loud shriek. And when, a few moments after, his companions bore him back, they found, to their horror, that his heart had been pierced, and his scalp had been torn from his head.

"There is some treachery among ourselves. When the fight is over I'll look into it; and woe to him that killed Sandy Spicer," shouted the leader.

The fire which opened from the tower at first was hot, and fatal to several of the besiegers; but in a short time it slackened, for Paul had begun to get short of ammunition.

"Cut down the gate with your axes, lads," shouted the leader, not attempting to play Indian any longer in his voice, though dressed like one. "Make a bold push, and the day is ours!"

And they did so; and in a few moments would have effected an entrance, had not the

terrible war-whoop of the *real* Comanche been heard in their rear; and the next instant, pouring in a murderous fire, a band—they knew not how large, or who they were—bounded in amongst them, led by a warrior, whose every blow brought a man to the earth.

"To your horses, lads—save yourselves as best you can—they're too many for us!" cried the leader of the attacking band.

And lucky was it for them that their horses were near, else not one of them all would ever have escaped. As it was, more than half were left dead upon the ground. But the leader, fighting desperately, got the rest off, and all of his wounded. And not being prepared for pursuit, Mr. Delorme could not follow them.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Laguna, again I must beg you to forgive me for my unjust suspicions, and my cruel and unmanly treatment," said Mr. Delorme, after he had returned from driving away his assailants, and stood once more in his house.

"Laguna forgets all but the pale-faced chief's kindness!" was the reply of the young chief.

"Again you have placed me under renewed obligations by your bravery. How can I reward you?"

"By never speaking of it again. I have done right—no more!"

"Take this from me," said Mrs. Delorme, attempting to throw a rich chain of gold about his neck.

But he pushed it back with his hand, and quietly said:

"I am free! I do not like chains!"

She blushed, and turned away; and in a few moments was in her chamber, where she burst passionately into a fit of weeping.

"O Heaven! I am scorned by this *savage*: I, who am beautiful, and so fondly, madly love him!" she sobbed.

But the sound of approaching footsteps warned her to be upon her guard; and she checked her sobs, and hastily wiped her eyes. It was Paul Malerson who came. His face was flushed, and he seemed much excited.

"What do you want? Why do you come here to my private chamber?" she asked.

"Do you know, madam, who it was that led the attack here to-night?" said he.

"No. Why do you ask? Who was it?" she answered.

"It was the man that you told me was my father!" said Paul, narrowly watching every change of expression in her face.

"Heavens! John Malerson a robber?" almost screamed Mrs. Delorme.

"Yes. I suspected as much, when I saw him and his associates in Galveston. He led the murderous gang, disguised as Indians, to-night. And now I know why he asked so particularly about the wealth of Mr. Delorme."

"You have not told Mr. Delorme of this yet?"

"No; he was busy when I came in."

"Then, for your life, do not! The villain has been foiled: do not now expose him!"

"I do not believe that he is my father."

"He is, Paul—O Heaven! he is! I know it! Would to God that I did not!"

"What is the secret that he holds in terror over your head?"

"Paul, in mercy do not ask me now. The time may come when I will tell you; but do not ask it now. I am very, very wretched!"

And she wept, as if she, indeed, was so.

"I am going to Galveston again," said Paul, when his aunt became more composed.

"For what?" she asked.

"To warn him, that if he puts his feet on this plantation again, his neck is in danger—even if he be my father."

"Do be cautious, Paul! Let me advise you not to go near him. Some of his vile gang may assassinate you."

"I do not fear them. Moreover, I must go to Galveston, for I promised to see Ada McAlpin, once more, before I part with her forever. That done, you may arrange matters with Stella and her father, for me, as soon as you please. I begin to love the girl, and I am sure she does not dislike me."

"Well, Paul, if you must go, do it; but return quickly. Take this purse: it contains all the money which I have by me now."

He took it, and left her again to herself.

CHAPTER XVII.

Ada McAlpin sat in her beautiful room, looking pale, sad, and dejected, to an unusual degree. She was not dressed with her customary care. Her beautiful hair lay in tangled masses upon her white and lovely neck and shoulders. Her eyes were red with weeping. She started, and trembled, when she heard a knock at the door; and her voice was low and husky when she said:

"Come in."

It was Jack Malerson who entered.

His look was also gloomy and morose.

"What news?" she asked.

"Dark—very dark!" he muttered.

"Where is Paul?" she asked.

"I neither know nor care. I went to Delorme's place to carry the girl off, and thus serve you, and lost half of my party, and came near losing the number of my mess!"

"And I'd not have shed a tear if you had," said Paul Malerson himself, who had followed the footsteps of his father noiselessly, and now stood upon the threshold of the room.

Ada started, and uttered a faint scream; but John Malerson turned, with a scowl, and said:

"Listeners never hear any good of themselves!"

"Whether you are a listener or not, you will never hear much good spoken of you!" said Paul, bitterly. Then, turning to Ada, he said: "I did not think that you were leagued with this man and his robber gang!"

"I am not, Paul—I am not!" she said.

"It is false! Did I not hear him this moment say, that he had tried to carry off Stella Delorme, to please you?" cried Paul, angrily.

"Yes—you heard me say so; but this girl knew nothing of the plan!" said John Malerson. "If you want to abuse any one, pitch into your father, and not into that girl, who is ten times too good for a milksop like you!"

"Your gang didn't find me a 'milksop,' the other night, I reckon!" said Paul. "Some of them went to their last home, with a ticket from my hand."

"Yes; and if you don't look out, some of them will provide you with a traveling-pass to join their friends in the long journey!"

"I'm not afraid of them, here or anywhere else. They may thank me that they and their leader are not in jail; for I alone know who it was that made the attack on La Balsa de Flores."

"Indeed! Well, I am very grateful that you don't try to hang your father! They will feel very glad to hear how merciful you are. Probably they'll vote you a resolution of thanks!" said John Malerson, with a sneer.

"I will not bandy words with you; but I wish to see this lady alone, sir."

"Oh, very well! But mark you, lad: you needn't try to play her false, for your fancy charmer on the plantation, for you shall never marry her! I've sworn to that, remember!"

"Bah! you threaten one who knows no fear," said Paul—as his father, after uttering these words, left the room.

"Paul, you are not going to marry her, are you? Oh! tell me that you are not, or else kill me on the spot!"

"Ada, if I were more of a villain than I am, I would lie to you, and say that I would not marry her. But I cannot say it. Stella Delorme will be mine in a few days."

Ada did not reply. It seemed as if she could not. Her face became as pale and as rigid in its expression as marble. Her fingers were clutched into the palms of her hands till the blood actually started from beneath her finger-nails. There was no tremor on her lip; not an eye-lash quivered; not a limb moved; but her eyes gazed upon him with an icy glare, which he never, never could forget.

"Ada, what is the matter?" he asked, at last, almost terrified by her silence and terrible look.

"Nothing," said she, speaking slowly, as if she were in great pain. "Go!" she added, raising her arm, and pointing towards the door.

"My Heaven! not while you look so! You are ill!" he cried.

"Go!" she repeated; and still her white arm and its marble finger pointed to the door.

"Not leaving you thus!" he cried. "Speak one kind word to me, Ada!"

"Go!" she said, louder than before: and still she pointed to the door.

He was almost as pale as she when he obeyed and went out.

She stood after that for a moment as he had left her—stood until she heard him close the front door; and then she fell senseless to the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"My God, girl, has he been striking you?" asked John Malerson, as he entered the room, and found Ada upon the floor, with the blood streaming from her nose and mouth.

"Yes—yes, to the heart!" she murmured. "Not with his hands, but his words—his words!"

"Poor girl, I pity you—indeed I do!" said the captain, with unwonted tenderness, as he raised her from the floor, and helped her to wipe the blood from her face.

Terrible, indeed, was the mental excitement, the soul's struggle, the heart's misery which could produce such an effect physically upon her.

Malerson would have called a servant to help her, but she forbade it, and went alone to her toilet-room, and there washed away the stains as well as she could.

She was very pale when she returned to the sitting-room, but very calm.

"You have been kind to me, sir, so far!" said she to Malerson. "Will you yet help me? I have considerable money and many jewels."

"I don't want any of your money—but tell me what I can do for you, and it shall be done. What do you want?"

"Revenge—REVENGE!" said Ada, in a husky whisper.

"On him?" asked the captain.

"Yes, but through her! She must die, and by my hand!"

"Good! I like your spirit. But how can this be accomplished?"

"In some disguise I must gain admission to her presence—once there, I will drink her very heart's blood!"

"Well, study out how you wish the thing done, and I will never fail you. I have fifteen or twenty men left, who burn for vengeance on those who killed their companions."

"I will arrange some plan as soon as my brain cools. It is hot now, very hot."

"Yes, poor girl—I see it is. I will go now and see my men, and keep a look-out upon Master Paul. Were he not my own son, I'd split his wizen before I slept. But I shall have use for him, and he may come to reason after that girl is out of the way. He may yet be yours, and as fond as ever."

"Never—never!" cried Ada, wildly. I have loved him as never woman loved before—but now, words may not tell how I loathe and hate him! I hate him too much to wish for his death. I want him to live, that I can make him miserable. But leave me now, I wish to be alone, that I may grow calm. Come again to-night. I will by that time think of a plan to govern my future course."

"Women are curious creatures," murmured the captain, as he went out. "If they can't love, they'll hate—if they can't be honey, they'll be vinegar—if they can't whisper, they'll thunder. Curious creatures are women."

The captain had just finished this soliloquy, when he saw his son moving slowly along the street.

"Paul, hold on a bit," said he. "I've a message for you."

"What is it?" said Paul, gloomily, for he felt bad at the manner in which he had parted from Ada, to whom at one time he had been much attached.

"I want you to tell Mrs. Hattie Delorme, as she calls herself, that I am in need of a couple of thousand dollars; and that if she will send the money by you she will save me the trouble of going to her husband, and asking him for it. Tell her there is no use in her fooling with me—I must have it."

"I will deliver your message, and advise her to treat it with contempt," said Paul.

"Which she will not do," said the captain, passing on.

CHAPTER XIX.

"I cannot endure this ever-burning passion—nor can I yet restrain it! I had thought, when I married Delorme—or, rather, when I linked myself by marriage-bonds to his wealth—that the wild passions which were my curse in youth had left my veins, abandoned my nature forever! But wilder glows the fire now

than then. It maddens me to think it, yet I love this cold and haughty savage even to idolatry! How quickly and how gladly would I fly with him far away from these scenes of luxury and comfort—from all of civilization, to share his perils and his hardships! He must be mine—he cannot forever be senseless to my advances!"

Thus soliloquized Mrs. Delorme, some days after the incidents last related, concerning her, while she walked in the pleasure-grounds which adjoined her husband's mansion.

And while she spoke, her eyes—and fine eyes were they—were bent upon him as with an air of sadness and thought, he slowly approached her along the same avenue, not appearing to see her, for his eyes were upon the ground. Since his gallantry in the defence against the robbers, Mr. Delorme had imposed no more tasks upon him, but had rather treated him as a brother and a favorite guest.

When Lagona had approached closely to, and observed her, he stepped aside, and would have passed on, had not she addressed him.

"Why is there a cloud upon the face of Lagona?" she asked, adopting the figurative style which she had heard him use, and knew to be favorite with his people.

"Because the sun which my heart loves does not shine upon it!" he replied, quietly.

"Then there is some one whom Lagona loves among his people—some maiden beautiful as the flowers, who laughs like the waters, and dances like the birds among the green trees?"

"No! If there were, Lagona would not be here."

"What keeps Lagona here?" asked the crafty woman, noticing that, for a wonder, his dark eyes were fixed upon her with an apparent expression of interest, and that for the first time he lingered, and did not as usual pass her with utter carelessness.

"His heart!" said the Indian, sadly. "He is master of his life, but not of that."

Mrs. Delorme trembled with agitation, for in her blindness she actually began to believe that she had awakened feelings of attachment in the breast of the brave son of the forest. And all too rashly she determined to know if it was so.

"If Lagona loves, why does he fear to speak it—he who fears no enemies, who is so brave in battle, ought not to be a coward in love," she said.

"The tongue of Lagona is tied, and his hands are bound," said the chief.

"How? I do not understand you."

"I promised the pale-faced chief I would not try to carry away his daughter. I can only look upon her as the wilting flower looks upon the sun—to pine and die!"

"You still love her, though she scorns you?" cried Mrs. Delorme, pale with anger.

"We love the Great Spirit most when he sends death to take us away!" said the Indian, calmly.

"Why do you not love one who loves you—who worships you more than ever woman worshipped man!" cried Mrs. Delorme, passionately, and tears rolled down her face.

"Who loves me so?" asked Lagona, quietly.

"I—I—proud, wealthy, educated—I love you, and would fly to the end of the world with you!" she cried.

"That would be a very long journey—you are another man's squaw, and I cannot go," said the chief, as coldly as if he were talking to a stone; and he passed on, heedless of her tears and sobs.

"I will be revenged on him—I will be revenged on him!" were the first words which she uttered, after the fire of anger had dried up her tears. "If he loves Stella, he shall see her given to another, and that will be worse than death to him. But it may drive him to desperation, and then he will take her by force, forgetting his promise," she again said.

The sight of young Paul Malerson entering the gate, on his return from Galveston, caused her to cease her soliloquy, and return to the house.

CHAPTER XX.

After Paul had reported upon the affairs which Mr. Delorme had intrusted to him, and taken especial care to pay his particular respects to Stella—who had seemed more and more pleased with him, now that he seemed to be in full favor with her father—he sought for Mrs. Delorme, who had retired to her fa-

vorite sitting-room. He soon found her, calm and composed, without a trace of her recent passion visible.

"I am glad to see you, dear Paul," said she. "How have things went with you? Did you break off that useless connection in Galveston?"

"Yes; and I fear I have broken the poor girl's heart," he replied, gloomily.

"Pshaw! Have no fear of that. Women's hearts don't break easily!"

"Seeing that you are a woman, my good aunt, I'll try and believe you. But what do women generally do when those whom they love turn the cold shoulder on them?"

"Hate—hate a thousand times more fiercely than they ever loved!" cried Mrs. Delorme, so wildly that Paul started back, in terror almost.

"Heavens! aunt, what excited you so?" he cried, in astonishment. "I ask you a simple question, and you answer with terrible vehemence."

"A pain darted through me at the moment I spoke—so severe, that I scarce know what I said," she replied, again as calm as ever. "Have you seen Stella since you returned?"

"I left her but a moment before I came here," was his reply. "She seems more beautiful each time that I meet her."

"She is a very lovely girl; and it is your own fault if she is not soon your wife."

"Will her father give his consent?"

"Yes; your recent bravery and general good conduct have had a great effect upon him; and I am confident he will yield if you can win her love. In truth, he has hinted as much to me."

"Well, good aunt, I will do my best. I will even try and speak to her to-night upon the subject. But, aunt—changing this pleasant subject to a less agreeable one—I have a message for you from the man who you say is my father; but, for my life, I can't look upon him as such."

Mrs. Delorme turned pale when she heard these words.

"What message did John Malerson send me?" she asked, in a husky tone.

"A bold one, which I told him you would treat with scorn."

"Name it! name it! Judging from his past, nothing in his future will surprise me."

"He told me to tell you to send him two thousand dollars; and said, that if you did not—"

Paul hesitated.

"Speak on! What did he threaten if I did not?"

"He said he would call on Mr. Delorme for it!"

"O Heaven! I must yield to his demand!" groaned the unhappy woman.

"Must, aunt? Must! What hold has he upon you to torment you so?"

"Paul, I cannot tell you; but for your sake as well as my own, I must accede to his demand. How to get the sum without Mr. Delorme's knowing the destination of it, I do not know; but it must and shall be done! But, Paul, when you carry it to him, beg him to go to some foreign land, and to trouble me no more. If he does not, he will force me to commit that deed which shall rob him of all power over me!"

"Aunt, you do not hint at suicide?"

"I do, Paul! God help me! I do!" murmured the unhappy woman.

"What can be this terrible secret?" murmured Paul to himself.

"Leave me now for a time," said Mrs. Delorme; "leave me, and let me collect my thoughts, and form my plans for future action."

Paul obeyed; and went, wondering all the while what could cause the fearful influence which his reputed father held over Mrs. Delorme.

CHAPTER XXI.

"You are known at the Delorme plantation, are you not?" asked Ada McAlpin of John Malerson, when, in accordance to her wishes, he came to visit her on the night of the day when she dismissed Paul so imperatively.

"I would be if I went in my rough, as I did before. But, dear soul! I am as used to disguises as an actor; and if you want me to go there, I'll rig up so that my best friend—Satan himself—won't know me; though there's one there, close akin to the devil, that hates and fears me enough to know me anywhere.

But if she were to recognize me, she'd be mum for her own sake!"

"She! Do you mean Stella Delorme?"

"No; I mean her who calls herself Madam Delorme."

"With her I have nothing to do: it is the heart's blood of Stella Delorme which I seek, and will have!" said Ada, bitterly. "She has robbed me of Paul's love, which was my life; and she must die!"

"Dear soul! how I do like your spunk! But what sort of a plan have you laid? If you're as good at plotting as you are at hating, you must succeed."

"You must disguise yourself as a negro-trader, and sell me to Mr. Delorme as a house-servant; if possible, I must become the waiting-maid of Stella."

This proposition of Ada was received at first with a long whistle of surprise, and then with a peal of coarse laughter by the captain.

"Why, you dear soul!—you little beauty!—you must be crazy to think of such an idea. I should like to see you rigged up so that you could be sold for anything but a white gal—and one of the best lookin' that ever shook a foot!"

"Stay where you are, and you shall see."

And, with these words, Ada left the room.

"I do wonder what the dear soul does mean!" muttered Malerson, wonderingly, when he was left alone. "She's a thoughtful creature—she is!" said he, as he glanced at a decanter of brandy which he saw standing on the sideboard, with a goblet near it. "I wish I was younger and handsomer," he added, after helping himself to the beverage; "she might have taken a shine to me herself. Once I took among the girls like old rye amongst Kentucky boatmen. I was a king-pin—boss of the heap. But my day for that has gone by."

The old man sighed, as if he regretted it, and then smiled over another glass of brandy.

This done, he amused himself looking at the pictures and furniture of the room—which, as we have before said, though Frenchy, were decidedly rich.

"Nice traps," he muttered. "Must have cost a pile of dimes! What a fool Paul was not to keep in with her! Such capital taste she has in brandy!"

And he took another nip to justify his last opinion.

"She stays a mighty long time!" continued the captain. "I wonder what she's a-doing!"

At that moment, a very bright and pretty quadroon girl, arrayed precisely as that class do in New Orleans, entered the room.

"Girl, where's Miss Ada?" asked the captain, after looking at her intently for a moment.

The girl made no reply, but stood still, and looked at him.

"Maybe you don't belong here?" he said, inquiringly.

"Guess I does, Massa Malerson," said the girl.

"So I suppose, since you know my name, my flower o' tansy. But where is Miss Ada?"

"Never a great ways off when I'm around, Massa Cap'n," said the girl, showing her white teeth.

"But that isn't answering my question, my yellow diamond."

"Well, Massa John, you answer me one question, den I'll tell you whar to find Missy Ada."

"Well, ask your question; I'll take a nip of brandy, and answer it," said Malerson, suiting his actions to the word.

"What d'ye think a nice yaller gal like me is wuth in de Orleans market?"

"Well, let's see. I reckon you're about eighteen—well made up, clean rigged, and tolerable good lookin' for one o' your color. Your hair isn't kinky, and shines like a black horse's mane—teeth sound, and eyes as bright as new pewter. I reckon you'd go close on to fifteen hundred dollars—maybe sixteen to an old chap like me."

"A pretty high price—yet not half what I set upon myself," said Ada (for it was she), speaking now in her natural voice.

"Well, I'm willing to be swallowed by a Frenchman for a frog, and spit up again," exclaimed the captain, in surprise. "Why, Miss Ada, if your natural mother was here she wouldn't know you!"

"That is all I wished to know. Now, prepare your disguise as well. I shall carry money enough with me for all purposes."

The keen eyes of Malerson flashed as with a new idea, and he said:

"All right, Miss Ada; I will be ready by morning. But it won't do for you to carry money; that would be so out o' fashion for niggerkind, it might lead to the discovery that you was a possumin'."

"Possibly so. I will therefore intrust my funds to you; but my weapons I will keep to myself. And mark me, Captain Malerson—if I see a sign of treachery in you, you will be my first victim!"

"Bless your dear soul, Miss Ada! I'd sooner think of cutting my own throat than that. You can depend on me to the last—to the very last!"

"Interest leads the best of men," said Ada, quietly. "Let it lead you in this case; for I will make it your interest to do my bidding. But now I must beg you to leave me for the night; I have much to arrange before morning. Call then, and ask my own servant—whom I shall leave here until I come back—for 'Lena'; and I will, under that name, be ready to travel with you. You may have many offers for me on the route; but upon the least sign of your treachery to me, I will reveal myself and punish you!"

CHAPTER XXII.

It was some days later. The hour was evening—one of those sweet, quiet evenings peculiar to the balmy and delicious atmosphere of South-Western Texas. The day's labor had just closed, and the negroes were marching to their quarters, from the fields, with laughter and with songs full of fun and local allusions.

They need never call the half-sickly, half-sentimental and all-nonsensical effusions of city Ethiopian minstrelsy an imitation of Southern plantation melodies—they are no more like them than a turnip is like an orange. Go and hear the "firing up," "landing," or "good-bye" choruses of the black hands on a Southern cotton-boat, or the old homestead songs of regular Southern darkeys, and you will hear music—music as natural as the gushing of bright waters, or the carol of forest birds.

Mr. Delorme was seated, as was his wont at that hour, on his broad piazza, in a position which commanded a view of the gate. His entire family was around him—that is, his wife, daughter, and Paul Malerson. Laguna, too, stood near, leaning against the trunk of a shade tree, regarding the group with a quiet and mournful expression, which of late had been almost constant with him. His tall and elegant form—his noble features, all set off with his picturesque costume, made him indeed very handsome.

At this moment a man, roughly dressed, yet full as well as the ordinary class of men in that section, drove through the gate, in a covered, single wagon. His face was dark, as if with exposure to the weather, and his thick, bushy hair and heavy beard were red as fire, and coarse and tangled. It seemed that he was not poor, for he drove a splendid horse ahead of his wagon, and wore a heavy gold chain over his rough vest, and a very costly pin in his dirty shirt-bosom.

"I wonder who that can be coming here?" said Paul, as the stranger approached.

"He is dressed more like a nigger-trader than a gentleman," said Mr. Delorme. "Perhaps he is some half-starved-out up-country planter, looking for land! I see he has a servant in the back part of his wagon."

"A woman—I reckon your first thought was the best—he's a nigger-trader," said Paul.

By this time the wagon had halted in front of the house, and its driver alighted.

"How d'ye do, sir?" said the stranger to Mr. Delorme, in a hoarse, gruff tone. "I've been down this way a sellin' off a lot of dark-eyes—got only one left, and as night was a comin' on, seein' your plantation, I concluded I'd stop."

"You are welcome to put up for the night," said Mr. Delorme; "but I've got as many hands as I want, especially house-servants, and your girl there doesn't look hardy enough for the field."

"No—not exactly, I took her in the way of trade. Light, Lena—be spry gal, or I'll help you with a whip!" said the stranger, roughly.

The girl at first shrunk back, as if she feared the trader would strike her, and then sprung lightly out upon the side of the wagon opposite from him.

"She's as lively as a kitten, if she's only stirred up once in a while!" continued the stranger. "I'd like to get rid of her, for she's the last o' my lot, and I want to go back to St. Louis for more."

"What a pretty quadroon she is, and bashful, too, for a nigger," said Paul, noticing that the girl seemed to shun observation. "She'd make a nice waiting-maid for you, Stella. If I had the money I'd buy her and give her to you."

"For the matter o' that, young gentleman," said the stranger, "I'll take your note for a year, made and pervided though, that this old gentleman, whom I take to be your father, will endorse your paper. I'll likely be around this way again!"

"It is not likely that my uncle will endorse my note," said Paul, quietly.

"Yes, since you design the girl as a present to Stella, I will not refuse," said Mr. Delorme, pleasantly.

Lena was now sent to the kitchen to get her supper with the other servants, while the trader's horse was put up, and he invited into the house. Though Mr. Delorme did not like his rude looks or ways, nor his business, still he extended to him the same hospitality that he would have afforded to a gentleman. I make this distinction, even as it is ever made in the South. Though tolerated as a kind of "necessary evil," neither the gambler nor the negro-trader is admitted into genteel circles in the South. It is only in pure New York, puritanic Boston, or right-angular Philadelphia, that a thieving black-leg can be seen hand in hand with judges on the bench and professed gentlemen!

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was night, and in its stillness two persons stole out from the mansion of Mr. Delorme—stole out silently in the darkness as if by some preconcerted agreement, and did not pause until they were beyond hearing of its inmates. They were John Malerson, and Ada—the disguised Lena.

When they had reached a small orange-grove, they paused and entered into conversation.

"Is all arranged—the sale made?" asked Ada, in a low tone.

"Yes," replied Malerson; "here is his note and the bill of sale for my girl, Lena, for sixteen hundred dollars—signed by me as John Rathbone, of St. Louis. I had to work some to get so high a price, but I was afeared, if I let you go low, they might suspicion that all wasn't right! But Miss Stella took a likin' to you, cause you seemed so modest when I sent for you to come in the parlor and be looked at, and I knew that all was right so long as she wanted you!"

"It was a terrible ordeal to be scrutinized by him who has sworn to be mine forever!" murmured Ada. "Terrible to be so near her whom I hate, and see the false traitor cast on her the looks of love which were mine—mine only. But it is past, and my hand is stronger, my will more deadly, for it!"

"That red Indian seemed to take a great fancy to you—his eyes were on you all the time."

"I noticed his look, but there was more of suspicion in it than admiration for me. I fancy he loves Stella Delorme, therefore must hate Paul. If he did not love her, he might become my assistant; but as it is, he would be the first to guard her. I must beware of him."

"I'd like to have a dig at him—I know now who it was that killed Sandy Spicer on the night we made the attack here!"

"You must not meddle with him—you will have enough to do to get me off, after my work is done!"

"That's so—and I suppose we had better fully understand the plan now."

"That is what I directed this meeting for. How much of my money have you got left?"

"Nigh on to two thousand dollars."

"And the horses which are left with your friend on the back track will be safe?"

"Yes."

"Then in the morning go back and remain there for nine days. On the tenth night, from an early hour, be with both horses in the clump of trees one mile from here, which I pointed out to you. If I do not come to you within two hours after midnight—go away and come the next night, and so each night until I come, or you hear from me!"

"Why do you put it off so long, Miss Ada?"

"To make all things sure—for when I strike, I will strike home! It will take me some days to gain her confidence and learn her ways—then the rest will be easy!"

"To one so determined as you, it will. You ought to be at the head of a band! You'd do better than half the men we hear of!"

"You now fully understand me—it is not necessary to prolong the conference. I will steal back to my quarters—you to yours?"

And Ada hurried away with stealthy steps, toward the house.

"I reckon I'll atten' to a little business of my own, now!" said Malerson, to himself. "I hardly know whether to slope with what funds I've got from her, and leave this girl to her luck or not! She's got so much spirit that I like her—I wish she liked me as well. She should be my chief mate for life! I reckon I can get the note cashed somewhere with a fair discount. And then with a couple of thousand from Hattie, which I'm bound to have before I sleep, I'd have over five thousand in hand—quite a pile for me, if I had luck enough to hold on to it."

While the old man was thus running over his devilish plans, he was retracing his steps toward the house. Pausing before one corner, he regarded a light in an upper room, and muttered:

"She is there! I was lucky to find out that she slept alone—it will make my job an easy one—lest she should get frightened and scream. But if she does that, out will go her light forever. Old Jack Malerson has gone too far to stick at trifles!"

So saying, he crept quietly into the house.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Mrs. Delorme was in her sleeping apartment, yet she had not retired. She was in her undress, and looked very beautiful, but yet sad was her expression. She seemed to be engrossed in thought, and very often her voluptuous bosom rose and fell with swelling sighs. Suddenly she started from her seat by the dressing-table, on which her lamp stood, for she distinctly heard a light tap at her door. She rose, then paused, trembling, thinking that her ear might have been deceived.

"Who can wish to see me at this late hour?" she murmured to herself.

The knock was repeated, louder, and with impatience.

"Who is there?" she asked, in a low tone, as she approached the door.

"Open quickly for your own sake—it is important to you!" said some one, in a low whisper.

Startled so much that she thought neither of danger nor impropriety, she opened the door.

To her terror, the supposed negro trader entered, and she would have screamed aloud, had not Malerson cautioned her in his natural voice.

"O Heaven! John Malerson, why do you seek me here—will nothing short of my ruin satisfy your malice?" she groaned.

"Yes, money—'Hat'—money! That is all I want, old girl! I sent by Paul for two thousand dollars, and then thought I'd come and get it myself!" replied the brute, coarsely. "I was received so badly when I came as myself, by all hands, that I thought I'd rig up a little different, so as to be received better. It seems to me I pass better as a nigger trader than I did as your brother. The old cove handed out his brandy and cigars like a gentleman, to-night."

"For Heaven's sake speak lower—if you are discovered here it would be my ruin, your death!"

"The first very probable—the last exceedingly doubtful. I should only have to tell who you were, and why I came here—"

"Hush—hush! Say what you have to say, in a whisper, and that quickly, for we know not who is wakeful in this house!" groaned the terrified and most unhappy lady.

"Well, since you're not disposed for a little love-chat about old times, I'll make my business short. I want that money."

"You shall have it to-morrow!"

"Why not to-night?"

"I cannot get it—now in mercy leave me, and go in silence, or I am lost."

"Well, I'll go. But, mark you, that money must be in my hands to-morrow before I leave, or I'll ask old Delorme for twice the sum."

"Go—go—you shall have it. If there is mercy in your soul, leave me!"

Malerson opened the door to leave, but started back in terror, for there before him stood Lagona, with a tomahawk upraised in his hand.

"Ten thousand furies! He here, and I unarmed?" he muttered.

Lagona looked at Mrs. Delorme, who was struck utterly dumb by his appearance, and said:

"Lagona saw the pale-face sneaking like a thief to your lodge. He came to kill him, if he did wrong!"

"Harm him not—make no noise—let him go!" gasped the lady.

The upraised hand dropped by the Indian's side, and Malerson took speedy advantage of his chance to slip out when he was able, for he did not like the looks or the arms of the young Comanche.

"Do not go yet—stay one moment while I explain," said the miserable lady, as she saw Lagona turn to leave.

"Lagona is only a savage, a poor heathen; but he knows that it is not right for him to stand in the sleeping lodge of another man's squaw, at night!" said the young Comanche, coldly.

"Do not believe that I called him here! I hate him, and I fear him!" she gasped.

"The good should know no fear!" said Lagona.

"I am not good!" she groaned; "but in the name of the Great Spirit I beg you not to betray me, or to speak of this visit."

"Lagona is not a tale-bearer. That is the work of squaws," said the Indian, haughtily; and he turned upon his heel and went silently away.

Mrs. Delorme closed her door, locked it, then in an agony of tears threw herself upon her bed, not to sleep, but to weep the night away.

CHAPTER XXV.

"You are wonderfully handy in assisting in my toilette, Lena," said Stella to her new waiting-maid, some days after she had got her. "I can never thank Paul enough for having procured you for me!"

Had Stella Delorme noticed the flashing of the disguised girl's eyes, when the name of Paul was mentioned, she would have been terrified.

But Lena's head was turned away, and she seemed to be busy in regarding the flowering vines which were trained up over the window casement.

"You seem so readily to anticipate my every wish, that I have nothing to ask for, nothing to bid you do. You must have waited on some very nice and particular lady to have learned so well."

Lena merely bowed her head, but did not speak.

"Where did you learn?" continued Stella.

"In New Orleans, mistress."

"What made your mistress part with such a treasure as you are?"

"Misfortune, mistress!"

"Ah, she became poor, and had to sell you?"

"No, mistress! She had a faithless lover, and wanted to follow him to punish him—so she sold me, and started."

"What a romantic story—you must tell it all to me, some time."

"Yes, mistress!"

"Can you read, Lena?"

"Fortunes, mistress!" replied Lena, and she pointed to a white flower, upon which fresh blood was dropping—a flower which grew outside of the window.

"What does that mean?" asked Stella, in surprise.

"Death to some one who dwells under this roof—perhaps me—perhaps another!" said the girl, quietly.

"Why, a poor little bird has transfixed itself on the sharp point of a climbing cactus, and its blood is dropping on the flower!" said Stella, looking at once for, and finding the cause of what appeared to be such a singular phenomenon.

"Yes—it may have been false to its mate, and God has punished it," said the disguised girl.

"What a strange creature you are, Lena! so full of singular ideas—which, like your language, are superior to your station."

"My race, like monkeys, are good imitators, mistress. My first mistress was an actress once, and I learned a great deal of her."

"An actress, and could she be a lady?"

"How else could she take the part of a lady where there are thousands to criticise her words and looks and actions?"

"True! You have had a good teacher, Lena. Your own skill and grace prove that. Your figure is fine, your hand and foot smaller than my own, your voice musical, your eyes beautiful—oh! if you were not colored, I should suffer in comparison with you."

"And yet—"

The eyes of Lena flashed wildly as she commenced to speak, but in a second she checked herself, and the thought she had been about to utter remained unspoken.

"Yet what, Lena? Do not be afraid to speak your thoughts. I allow the familiarity, because I feel that you will not abuse it. What were you going to say?"

"I have forgotten, mistress. There is Master Paul in the Orange walk, beckoning to you!"

"Ah, yes. I see him—get me my hat and scarf—I will go and join him."

Lena obeyed the order. Stella put on the articles and went out. Then the pent up passions of Ada McAlpin burst forth—then, the moment when she was alone.

"Yes, go to meet him!" she hissed between her bloodless lips. "Talk sweet words to him while you may, for your time is short! One day more, and red-handed death will claim you for a victim. Thank heaven for the omen of this day—the bird and the flower—for by it I know I shall succeed! And then, shall I be done with revenge? No—no! His treachery will not be half punished in her death. He must be poor, wretched, in every way miserable—so miserable that he will hate life, and yet not dare to die. Then, then he must know who wrought his misery, and for what it was done. When that hour arrives, I can die contented."

"God! Must I look on them, thus! He offer her his arm—she takes it—they walk down to that favorite arbor, where they will sit for hours. My brain is on fire—my heart will burst—I will not wait! But yes—patience, to-morrow will be the tenth night—the moon will be out, and so will they! Patience, Ada—patience, one day more and vengeance is thine!"

With a great effort, Ada calmed the tumultuous torrent of her passions, turned away from the sight which so maddened her, and busied herself in some little occupation which her mistress had assigned her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"How do you like your new attendant, Stella?" asked Paul, when Miss Delorme joined him in the orange-grove.

"Oh, very, very much, Paul. I never can thank you enough for the present. She requires no commands, anticipates all my wishes—in truth, seems to know better what I require than I do myself. Her taste in dress is exquisite—you see how well she dresses my hair and arranges my toilet. Yet she has some very singular ideas! I asked in jest, what kind of a dress would suit me for a bridal. What do you think her answer was?"

"I am not good at guessing—pray, tell me!"

"She said, 'Black!' I asked her why—she seemed confused, and hesitated. I pressed her for an answer, and she replied, 'Because in marriage I would lose my freedom!'"

"Not so singular an idea, after all—perhaps she is becoming tired of her bondage and sighing for freedom, she uttered that expression as a hint of her feelings."

"No—I think not; for when, a short time before, I asked her if she was contented with her place, she said yes, and hoped that only Death would cause her to be separated from me!"

"I know another who echoes the same wish!"

"Another?"

"Yes, dear Stella, and that other is myself! Until lately I have had no hope in my heart, and I tried and succeeded in feeling indifferent toward you. But hope has entered my bosom, and I have dared to love you—you who so far, so very far my superior in everything—in beauty, in intelligence, in fortune!"

"Love is the most powerful democrat on earth—an utter leveler!" said Stella with a smile. "He knows no rank, title, or power but his own. He bends the heart of the prince

down at the feet of the peasant maid—he lifts the cottage angel to the throne!"

"And you will bid me hope, Stella, dear Stella?"

"I did not say so, Paul. This matter is new to me, and requires consideration. I must study my own heart—ask it what it feels, before I can reply to you. But I can say at once, that of late I have learned to admire and respect your good qualities."

"Admiration and respect are surely the heralds of approaching love," said Paul.

"You are growing very poetical," said Stella, smiling.

"With such a subject as yourself before me, how could I be else?"

"And flattering, also," she said, more gravely.

"I meant no flattery, dear Stella."

"Well—well, Paul, I'll not accuse you of it—but let us drop this subject of love until to-morrow night—a day's thought will teach me how my heart feels toward you, and you shall not accuse me of a lack of candor!"

"I accede to your wish, dear Stella—of what shall we speak?"

"Of that poor Lagona. I pity him from my soul! He has a wild idea born from a dream, that I am destined to be his bride—a thought which from my very soul I shudder at, though he is brave and noble, and has saved my life. I cannot forget that by nature he is a blood-stained, blood-loving heathen and savage!"

"I so love you, dear Stella, that I would bow my head to anything which would accelerate your happiness, no matter how it affected my own—but in truth, rather than see you his bride, I would see you decked for the grave. How contemptuously he speaks of my aunt, how scornfully of all squaws, as he terms women."

"Yet never in word or look has he shown scorn, or any other feeling but the deepest reverence, for me. Ah! never can I forget how noble and chivalric, how utterly death-daring was his action in rescuing me from the Lipans on both occasions. And, when I was alone with him on the prairie, not even yourself, Paul, could be more respectful than he!"

"Ah, Stella!" said Paul, mournfully, when he noted how enthusiastically she spoke of the nobleness of Lagona, "I fear, indeed, that when you study your heart, you will find it pre-occupied—no place there for hapless me."

"Paul, you do me wrong!" said Stella, quickly. "I am grateful to him—no more."

"Gratitude is a twin brother to Love," said Paul.

"No, Paul, you err greatly in that idea. They are not of the same blood. Gratitude is slow and born only of effect, or rather of cause. Love is a tameless steed, which will not bear a rein—springing, in an instant from nothing, into life. No one can control it—it controls all. Chains cannot bind it, death cannot kill it; it feeds and fattens upon persecution; it thrives when all things else perish. Incomprehensible as it is powerful—it is life's greatest joy; yet, alas! too often its greatest curse!"

"You are a philosopher, dear Stella—had you lived in Ovid's day, he would have sunk into insignificance, and the 'Art of Love' had never been written."

"It cannot be understood, if art it is—why should it be written?"

"I will not argue with you, dear Stella—I can only feel, not teach the passion," said Paul.

"And yet you are a Professor," said Stella, archly.

"You beat me upon every point," said Paul, with a smile.

"And yet yield to him whom I have conquered," said she, extending her hand, which he took and pressed to his lips.

CHAPTER XXVII.

It was night again—still, bright with the moon-rays, softened only by hazy clouds of snowy white, which drifted slowly, like spent foam, over the ocean-face of heaven—fragrant, too, with the breath of the breeze fresh from its wanderings among the flowers.

All was very still where Paul Malerson and Stella sat in a close-twined lower bordered all around by the thick-grown orange-grove, although during the early hours of evening the songs of negroes at their quarters, and the music of the rude banjos to which they danced, had been heard distinctly.

And the face of young Malerson glowed with a purer and holier light than we have ever seen upon it before, as he sat there, unrebuked— one arm twined around her slender waist, the other hand clasped in her own, and his eyes looking fondly down in her upturned face.

"O Stella, to hear you say that you will be my own—my fond and loving wife, is too much happiness. It seems as if I must be in a dream. Speak those blessed words again, dear, dear Stella!"

"Paul, I am yours, now and forever!" she murmured.

Paul bent down his lips to meet hers, but a hiss and a rustle, as if a serpent were near, caused both to start to their feet.

"Surely there can be no serpents here—one was never seen within the inclosure. I have heard father boast of it, though they are thick along the river and on the prairie!" said Stella.

"Our ears may have been at fault—I surely thought I heard something!" said Paul. "But all is still now—let us sit down again."

"No, dear Paul—the e is a strange chill in my heart—a fear as of some unseen and impending danger. My thoughts will turn back to the poor bird and the flower, which I saw yesterday!" said Stella, clinging to his arm, and trembling in spite of her efforts to be calm.

"You are the bird, and I am the thorn of death!" wildly shrieked Ada McAlpin, in a voice so natural, that Paul in horror recognized it, and was struck helpless as with a paralysis.

And as she spoke, the disguised girl bounded from her concealment with a gleaming dagger in her hand, aiming her blow directly at the unprotected bosom of poor Stella. Stella closed her eyes, but at that instant, quick like a shadow, a form leaped between her and impending death—the steel descended—descended into the breast of LAGONA the COMANCHE.

In a moment Paul had recovered his self-possession, and he seized the arm of Ada and wrested a revolver from her hand as she was about to use it, while he exclaimed:

"Mad girl—what would you do?"

"Break your heart, as you have mine—I have failed once, beware of the next attempt!" she exclaimed, and she broke from his grasp and fled away.

"Lagona is slain—help him!" gasped Stella, pointing to the stream of blood which gushed from his noble breast.

"No—the squaw hand would have killed the White Flower, but it was too weak to reach a warrior's heart!" said Lagona, faintly. And then, in spite of his assumed strength, he sunk to the ground.

Never did woman over a lover, or sister over a dying brother, bend more tearfully, anxiously, and tenderly than did Stella Delorme over Lagona then. She tore an azure scarf from her own fair neck and with it sought, not vainly to stem the ebbing tide of life—to check the terrible flow from the ghastly wound.

"Let me die, and go to the happy hunting-grounds while the smile of the White Flower is on my face, and my heart is warm under her touch!" said Lagona, faintly.

But it was not so to be. Paul aided first in staunching the wound, and then hurried to the house and brought help to bear the brave, true-hearted warrior in.

After this was done, and Paul had told how and by whom the wound was given, search was made everywhere for the disguised "Lena"—Ada McAlpin. But the search was made in vain—not even a trace of her could be found.

As soon as Stella was disengaged, Paul drew her aside; and, without concealing a single fact, revealed all that had ever occurred between himself and Ada—told of a connection founded upon foolish passion, and not upon love, which he had gone to her and broken the moment that he felt an affection for herself.

Stella listened to him quietly, until he had told all. When she said, gently:

"I wish you had told me this before, Paul."

"Why, would you have withheld the love from me which you have given?" he asked, and trembled for her answer.

"No, dear Paul—I should not—but there should be no concealment between those who love. Secrecy is the mother of Distrust, and distrust is the deadliest poison of love!"

"In future, you shall have no occasion to blame me even for that," said Paul.

"I am convinced that such will be the case, dear Paul. 'But to change the subject—do you think that Lagona's wound is mortal?'"

"Dangerous, but not mortal, the plantation surgeon says."

"I am glad! This is the third time that the noble fellow has risked his life to save mine. Don't look uneasy, Paul—I yesterday pointed out the difference between gratitude and love—I am grateful, would reward him were it in my power, but not with my love. That, Paul, is yours, and yours only."

"Bless you, Stella—bless you! It shall be the effort of a life-time in me to be worthy of you."

"There—a kiss, dear Paul, and I will retire to rest, if I can sleep after such a fearful night of events."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

John Malerson stood by a small fire, which he had lighted in a close thicket, not more than two miles, if so far, from the plantation of Varian Delorme. Two splendid horses—one with a side-saddle upon it—stood tied close at hand. He carried a rifle, and a knife and pistols were in his belt. Taking a watch from his pocket, he looked at it, and muttered: "It is only twelve; two hours to wait yet! I wish I was closer, so that, if there was a fuss, I might hear it! I'm more than half inclined to go and leave the girl to get out of her own scrapes. I've a full pocket now. If it wasn't for one thing, I would. I've been just fool enough to fall in love with the beauty myself. Whew! Time goes awful slow—I'll see if I can't grease his wings a bit."

To do so, the old villain drew a flask of brandy from his pocket, and took a lengthy draught therefrom.

"Them are the drafts I'm always capable of honoring," he muttered, as he replaced the flask in his pocket. "No one can liquidate them with a better grace than old Jack Malerson, if he does say it himself."

This sage conclusion delivered, the captain took a pipe from his pocket, filled and lighted it; then, sitting down with his back against the trunk of a tree, resigned himself to comfort.

For so long as the tobacco in his pipe lasted, he did not move, but watched the lazy clouds of smoke which curled and whirled up between him and the sky. But when the pipe gave out, he rose and again took out his flask to moisten the wings of Time. He had just raised it to his lips, when he heard a rustling in the bushes, and the next moment, Ada McAlpin, almost breathless with the rapidity of her flight, staggered into the circle of light made by the fire.

"Give me that—I am fainting!" she gasped, snatching the flask from his hand, and applying it to her own lips.

She took a draught of the fiery liquor, which seemed to revive her, and then she handed the flask back to Malerson, who re-linked the drink that her appearance had interrupted. After doing so, he asked:

"What news, my little lady—what news? Have you fixed the job for the lily-faced daughter of Delorme?"

"No—accursed fortune, no! My blow was well aimed for her heart, my arm full of strength, but that Indian, Lagona, who must have watched and followed me so silently that I heard him not, threw himself before her, and received the blow which would have killed her. I would have shot her, but Paul wrenched the pistol from my hand, and I was forced to fly."

"Did you kill the Indian?"

"I neither know nor care; he was not my game."

"I hope you did, just to avenge Sandy Spicer! He was the best man I had; my 'right bower' in everything. But what will you do now, Miss Ada?"

"First remove these stains from my face and hair, resume my name and station, and go to Galveston, where I will sell my servants, house, lot, and jewels, to raise as much money as I can; then come back, and under such disguises as I can to best purpose assume, linger around, until I have completed that in which I failed to-night. She shall die! Even if she is a wife in his arms, with a babe at her bosom, she shall die!"

"Miss Ada, if you'll listen to me, I'll put you in a way of doing the job, sure!"

"Name your plan, and be quick, for we must soon leave here."

"Do as you just said you would—that is, in

regard to property; then join the band of which I am captain, which yet numbers full thirty good men and true—become my wife, and we will never rest until every wish of yours is carried out. What d'ye say, Miss Ada—I mean all I say, and will do more."

"I will join your band—will lead them where any man dare follow; but I will be no man's wife until my revenge is all accomplished. After that I will—think of it."

"Well, as the best of the bargain is all on your own side, I must let all things go as you say."

"Very well; let that be our understanding. Now go and see if there are any signs of pursuit—if not, we must away at once, for soon it will be daylight."

The old captain went to the edge of the thicket, and carefully scanned the offing; but seeing no sign of danger, returned and so reported.

They thereupon mounted, and rode rapidly away toward the rendezvous where Malerson had been staying.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Some weeks elapsed before Lagona, though nursed with every care, was able again to move out in the open air. The blow of the "squaw hand" had been heavy, and had very nearly deprived him of life. Had it reached the white bosom of Stella—for which it was intended—her days had been by it ended. But at last he got so that he could mount his favorite white horse, and ride out upon the invigorating prairie. And then his strength rapidly came back—the blood began to thicken in his veins, and he to feel himself a man once more.

One day, he had ridden alone some miles from La Bolsa de Flores, and was slowly passing a thick grove, when a person, mounted upon a splendid blooded horse, dashed out before him, and signified a desire for some conversation. The individual who sat astride of this high-mettled charger was fully armed, with the effective rifle and revolving pistols of Colonel Colt—the most undoubtedly reliable weapon in the world—in costume dressed in the handsome, half-hunting, half-military garb of the Rangers. But the slight, elegantly-proportioned figure—the beautiful complexion, the hair now free and tossing in a wavy mass down about the neck and shoulders, proclaimed the rider to be a woman, and a very beautiful one.

"Have we met before, Lagona, Chief of the Comanches?" asked the stranger.

The Indian regarded her with a calm, close scrutiny for a few moments, and then said:

"We have! Lagona never forgets an eye that he has looked upon."

"Where?" continued the other.

"There," said the Indian, pointing toward La Bolsa de Flores. "Why does the squaw put on the dress of a warrior?"

"For the purpose of revenge. Can I not strike like a warrior?" replied Ada McAlpin, for she it was.

"No," said Lagona, baring his breast and showing the scar of his wound not yet entirely healed. "You struck Lagona, and yet he lives!"

"But I did not strike at you—you threw yourself in my way."

"Yes, to save the White Flower," said Lagona. "Why did you seek her life?"

"Because she had robbed me of my lover Paul Malerson was mine; he had sworn by the Great Spirit to have no other bride. He was false—she made him so, and I sought to punish her."

While Ada spoke, her eyes flashed, her color heightened, and her whole figure seemed to enlarge with excitement. There was a look of admiration in Lagona's eye, as he said:

"You have the heart of a warrior in the body of a squaw. Lagona will be your friend, but you must not hurt the White Flower. If you do, you strike again through Lagona's breast."

"I will do her no harm; I had a dream," said Ada.

"It is good. Dreams come from the Great Spirit," said the young chief. "He sends His messengers to us when we sleep, and have

* The superstition of Indians in regard to dreams is very remarkable. The dream of a leading chief or prophet will influence the action of a whole nation. He among them who does not heed a dream is regarded as being worse than a disbeliever in the Great Spirit, and worse with them (heathen, as they are termed) cannot be.

no wicked thoughts in our head; and they whisper good things to us which we must obey. Will my sister tell me what the angel told her in her dream?"

"Yes; they bade me not to harm the White Flower, but to help Lagona to win her for his wife, for so the Great Spirit had ordered. I have come to do it."

The effect of these words upon Lagona was singular and intense. The red blood mounted into his cheek, which had paled with long sickness; his eye flashed as if it looked upon a battle-field; his nostrils dilated, and his frame swelled, as if with new vigor.

"How can my sister help me?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"I have thirty brave men at my back, and plenty of money," said Ada, proudly.

"Where you can count one warrior, Lagona can count half a thousand," said the chief, proudly. "But I have promised the pale-faced chief not to steal his daughter while I dwell within his lodge. He has promised to give her to his nephew for a wife, and in two days I must see it, or go away," he added, mournfully.

"You need not while you are under his roof," said the wily girl. "Leave there, now; say to-day that your heart is too heavy to stay, and that you will not go back to your tribe. To this; then, when night comes, with my braves I will make an attack at the gate, which will draw the attention of the men from the house; then you can take her from her chamber, and fly with her to your own land, and the will of the Great Spirit will be done."

The young chief listened to her words, and looked into her earnest eyes as if he would read her very soul. She seemed so calm, so good in her intentions, and her advice so well accorded with his own desires, that he said:

"My sister speaks words of wisdom; they come from the Great Spirit, and Lagona will give heed to them."

"It is well—let my brave brother go to the camp of his sister and see her braves, then he can go and take leave of his friends at the plantation and return here, and to-night he can do as the Great Spirit wills it should be done."

The chief obeyed without hesitation; and turning his horse, followed her into the dense grove. For a quarter of a mile or more, they pressed on through the underbrush which grew thick among the great trees, and then they suddenly emerged into a small grassy area, entirely clear of timber, where the camp-fires of Ada's party were seen, and where some thirty men were grouped, with their horses picketed near. As Ada was seen, they sprang to their feet, and Jack Malerson, with an angry curse, looked upon Lagona—whom he at once recognized—as if he meant to attack him.

"Not a word, or an ill look," said Ada, sternly. "Lagona is my friend and brother—receive him as such."

The men seemed sulky, but Malerson instantly changed his looks and tone, and said:

"Any friend to the queen of our band is our friend. You are welcome, Chief of the Comanches. If you will eat, here is good cow-beef, that cost us only the killing; as good cow-dodgers as ever were baked in the ashes; and if you are thirsty, why, here in my flask is some brandy that would wake up a dead man."

And he offered his flask to prove his last assertion.

"I am not hungry. When I am thirsty, I drink that which the Great Spirit sends down to me from heaven, not the accursed fire-water of the pale-faces," said Lagona, haughtily; for he recognized Malerson, even though now disguised as before, and he hated him.

"Well, every one to their taste—some like water, but I go brandy whenever I can get it," said the captain, suiting the action to the word, taking a hearty pull.

"I will go to the lodge of the pale-faced chief, and tell him I am going back to my people—then I'll return here," said Lagona, addressing himself to Ada.

"And mind, no treachery, Mr. Comanche!" said Malerson.

"That is the trade of the pale-faces; I have not learned it," said Lagona, haughtily, as he turned and rode away.

"You had better be cautious how you offend that man, Malerson," said Ada to the captain. "Indians never forgive."

"I know some white men who don't, either; but let us know what is ahead, Miss Ada—for

by his actions I suppose you've formed some plan."

"Yes, a plan is formed, or partially so—will be entirely when he returns. Then you and the men shall know it."

Thus saying, Ada dismounted; and while one of the men respectfully approached and took charge of her horse, she walked to a small tent set apart from the main camp, and entered it.

"There's a girl for you, lads—a girl of spirit—knows how to plan first and execute afterward—is no more afraid of blood than she is of water. Here's to her—a health to Ada, THE QUEEN OF THE FREE RANGERS!" And Malerson again kissed his constant companion, the brandy-flask.

The men, by their looks and actions in imitating his biblic example, showed their appreciation of his sentiment; and very likely would have cheered, had not a noise been strictly forbidden.

They were a rude-looking, but well-armed, band, well supplied with saddle and pack horses, and, in their camp, made quite a military appearance.

But we are wanted elsewhere.

CHAPTER XXX.

"You surely do not mean what you say—you will not leave us now, when a day of festivity is approaching!" said Mr. Delorme to Lagona, when the latter told him, in the presence of his family, that he was going back to his tribe.

"I never eat my words! I am going back to my people!" said Lagona, quietly but firmly.

"Has anything been done to offend you?"

"No."

"Will you not remain if I ask you to stay?" said Stella, anxiously.

The proud Indian's lip quivered, and he turned away his head, when he said, in a lower tone, "No!"

"If you will go, at least give us time to prepare some presents for you. You must not go back empty-handed to your people!" said Mr. Delorme.

"I brought nothing; I will take nothing away," replied Lagona, and he turned to go.

"Accept this from me, at least," said Stella; and she took a golden chain from her neck, and offered it to him.

"I will keep it for the White Flower—I will wear chains for no other," said he.

"Accept this from me," said Paul, advancing and offering him a handsomely inlaid pipe.

"No—nothing from you—nothing!" said he, fiercely; and he turned upon his heel, and, without another word, left the apartment and the house. Mounting his horse, with only the arms which he had brought from the prairie, he rode away at full speed.

"Singular man—noble heart!" said Mr. Delorme, almost regretfully, as the young chief dashed away through the gate. "I now understand why he leaves us. He still wildly loves you, Stella; still adheres to the dream which he says led him to your rescue; and he felt that he could not remain and see you wedded to the husband of your choice. With an honor and a delicacy which would do credit to any white man, he prefers to go away and hide his grief from us, to whom he has rendered so many favors."

"He is noble in his way, but I could never love him—even though he has saved my life three times! I am sure Paul would have done as much if the opportunity had been afforded to him."

"I surely would rescue you, or perish with you, if you were in peril," said Paul. "But from my heart I pity the noble fellow, and forgive him for hating my more fortunate self."

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was night once more, and all was still at La Bolsa de Flores. It was near the retiring hour of Mr. Delorme and his family, when a sentinel, or look-out, hurried in from the tower over the gate, and said that an armed band of white men—evidently robbers, from their language and threats—had demanded admission at the gate, and being refused, were endeavoring to force an entrance.

"Heavens! Are we never to be at peace—never to rest?" moaned Mrs. Delorme, who latterly, from unrest and nervousness, had been rapidly wearing down and wasting away.

"To arms, my brave boy—I can trust you

now! Hurry to the gate, and I will follow with all the force I can bring!" cried Mr. Delorme to Paul, as he sprung for his weapons. In a few moments, the tower at the gate was fully manned, and a sharp fire opened upon the robbers, who had converted some wagons and timber, which had been left outside, into a breastwork, and fired from behind it with considerable security. The firing was continued for some time, apparently, with very little damage on either side, if any. Suddenly, during a lull in the firing, a piercing scream was heard in the direction of the house, and a moment after, a loud and terrible yell from the lips of an Indian—the Comanche's whoop of triumph—was heard.

"Paul Malerson!" shouted a voice from the robber band, which he too well knew, "this is the second stroke from Ada McAlpin! Be on your guard for another—it will come!"

"O God! Stella—it is Stella's cry!" groaned Paul; and both he and Mr. Delorme ran to the house, with their utmost speed.

When they arrived there, Stella was nowhere to be seen, and Mrs. Delorme lay senseless upon the floor.

From a few terror-stricken domestics, they learned, that while the firing was going on at the gate, an Indian, hideous with war-paint, had rushed in, seized Miss Stella in his arms, and fled with her, as if she had been only a child in his mighty grasp—uttering, as he went, the terrible yell which had startled the wretched father, and almost distracted lover.

Whence the Indian had come, or how departed, no one seemed to know.

Paul and Mr. Delorme hurried back to the gate; but the robbers, the moment after the tower had been first left by them, mounted their horses, and rode away at full speed. Their attack had evidently only been a ruse to distract attention from the house while Stella was abducted.

The agony of the father and lover was utterly indescribable. Neither of them would believe that the noble Lagona had been him who seized her; the servants had not recognized him—could not, in the paint and hideous apparel of the being who took her away. All that Paul felt, all that he dreaded—all that was worse than the agony of death to him—was the thought that she was in the power of Ada McAlpin, who would do anything, everything, to her, to be revenged on him, the forsworn and faithless lover.

"Let us to horse, at once, and follow them," cried Paul, when all search about the premises resulted in not finding even a trace of Stella and her abductor.

"We know not how or where to trace them in the night! We must send again for the brave and generous McCullough; his skill alone will serve us. He can almost track a bird, not to speak of a band of robbers; and his tried forces, too, are necessary, to meet and punish them," said Mr. Delorme. "I will send a messenger for him."

"I will be the messenger," said Paul. "I know the course to his station; rest I cannot until once more I have found my poor Stella, dead or alive."

"Bless you, my brave boy. A father's hopes and fears go with you. Hasten to bring the Rangers here; refreshments and fresh horses await them. Go, God bless you, go!"

Paul needed no urging. In less than ten minutes, he was riding the swiftest horse, at its full speed, upon his errand.

CHAPTER XXXII.

While Stella and her step-mother were listening, in an agony of fear, to the firing at the gate, the poor girl was terror-stricken at the appearance of the warrior described so briefly in the previous chapter. He gave her no time to fly, or to ask a question; but bounding to her side, lifted her, like a feather, with his left arm, and turned to the door, which he reached at a bound.

She uttered a piercing scream; but in a moment, he bound her scarf across her mouth, and then bore her, with rapid strides, to a spot by the wall, beneath a tree, and, by a branch of this, he aided himself to the wall, and over it.

Upon the other side was a snow-white horse, which she too well knew; and, for the first time, she felt that she was in Lagona's hands. She did not try to scream or struggle any more; for hope that, at the worst, he would not harm her, came in an instant to her heart.

Still clasping her in his powerful arm, he

leaped upon the swift horse, and rode away at its full speed. In a short time, he removed the scarf from over her mouth, and gave her more freedom to breathe.

"Lagona, Lagona, where do you carry me? Why do you tear me from my father's house?" she moaned.

"Ah the White Flower knows me," he muttered. Then he added: "No harm shall come to the White Flower, but she must be still. Worse enemies than Lagona are near."

And, a moment after, she heard the tramp of many horses joining them, and heard a harsh voice—which she thought had fallen upon her ear before—say:

"All right, Miss Ada; he's got the girl."

Then she trembled, for she knew that Ada McAlpin, who had already sought her life, was concerned in this transaction. And she closed her eyes, for she heard many rough voices around her, and she dreaded to look upon the speakers; and, strange as it was, she felt a trust in the brave heart which she could feel beating against her form, and in the strong arm which held her, and only feared those who were around her.

The party rode on at full speed for a distance, and then halted in a forest for consultation.

"When the day comes, and our track can be seen, the pale-faced chief will put the Rangers on our trail," said Lagona.

"What had we best do?" asked Malerson. "Them Rangers are not to be trifled with. They're born devils in a fight!"

"We ought to scatter into many parties, and go different ways. Then they must scatter, too, and will not know where we will meet," said Lagona.

"The words of the chief are wise," said Ada. "Let his advice be followed. With only one man, I will go with him; the rest can scatter so as to meet at such point as he seems best."

"Lagona has heard his sister's words, but he wants no one to go with him. He is most safe alone," said the chief, quietly but firmly.

"I will not take a man with me, but will go alone with you," said Ada.

"No; our queen must not go alone," said Malerson.

"She goes as she pleases, and when she pleases, sir," said Ada, sternly. "If she is your queen, as you say, she requires no dictation; if she is not, she will leave you and bear none."

Malerson saw that he had gone too far, and, biting his lip, remained silent.

"My sister can ride with me—no others," said Lagona. Four days from now, strike the forks of the Rio Peco; follow the right fork to its source in the mountains, and you will all find Lagona there, with warriors enough to defend you from a thousand pale-faces, if they follow you so far!"

He said no more, but rode on with Ada, while, under the direction of Malerson, the rest began to diverge.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Although hurried by his own ambitious and noble nature, as well as by the warmest entreaties of Paul Malerson, it was afternoon of the next day before Major McCullough reached La Bolsa de Flores with his Rangers. Partaking hastily of refreshments which Mr. Delorme had provided, and filling their haversacks with a cooked supply of food to last three or four days, they mounted fresh horses, and dashed away upon the main trail of the robbers—which was easily found and very distinct. After little more than an hour's hard riding, they came to the forest whence Ada McAlpin had first ridden to meet Lagona.

Into this, upon the broad track of many horses, they rode, and soon came to where the band who called themselves the "Free Rangers" had been encamped.

"About thirty of them, and all white men—not an Indian sign about the camp," said Major McCullough, after he had ridden around, and carefully looked at every mark which they had made. "It must have been one of them disguised as an Indian, who carried the lady off, while the rest were at the gate; that is, unless Lagona did it himself. I'll swear that no Indian has camped here—there isn't a moccasin track in the sand or ashes, nor any other sign."

"Lagona would not have done it!" said both Mr. Delorme and Paul.

"She is in the power of white wretches, who

will be less merciful than the savage!" groaned the latter.

"Then we've no time to lose," said the warm-hearted Ranger. "It is so long since I've seen blood run, that I've most forgotten its color."

But now their first trouble began. Upon leaving the camp, they found that the whole band had scattered off into twos and threes, taking different courses, diverging in every direction, the long leaps of their horses showing that they were both swift and fresh.

"The rascals were here at least three or four days resting and getting ready for their work," muttered McCullough. They wouldn't have lain here that long undiscovered if any of my boys had been scouting round in this region. There must have been an old hand with 'em to make 'em scatter so, to fool their pursuers. That's Indian, out and out!"

"What shall we do, how find which party have carried poor Stella away?" asked Paul.

"We must divide and follow each trail. They've probably agreed on some meeting-place; and by following up their trails, we'll overhaul them in time. But, in my opinion, this is going to be a long chase. They've worked too systematic for green hands!"

"Well, let us on—each moment of our delay is a gain to them!" said Paul, urgently.

"We must be cool till we are started, and afterward, too, or we'll lose the trail altogether," said Ben; and then he began to divide off his party, so as to place some upon each trail. By their particular desire, he so arranged that Paul and Mr. Delorme were to remain with him; and as they, like himself, were splendidly mounted, it was evident that they would be apt to lead in the chase.

"Now ride, men, as if old Nick was after us, and your salvation depended on your speed! If you overhaul any of the scoundrels, give 'em lead if they don't surrender, but be careful not to hurt the lady. Don't draw a rein or camp so long as your horses can stand or you can see a track! Remember and do your duty as men, and as Rangers of the 'Lone Star' State!"

"We will, Uncle Ben!" was the answering shout, and then forty pair of spurs touched as many flanks, and away flew the scattering band like keen-scented hounds upon the trace of game.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

On, like two clouds before the wind—on, like leaves borne upon the blast, rode Lagona upon his tireless steed, close followed by Ada McAlpin, upon one almost as good, and as less heavily burdened. On, during all of the first night—on, during all of the succeeding day, over the ocean-like prairie, dotted only here and there with clumps of trees—on until the second night drew on, and poor Stella was so faint and weary from being held in one position before the untiring warrior, that she murmured faintly, if he did not pause, that she must die.

"When we get to water we will halt," said Lagona; and he pointed to a fringe of timber not far ahead, and urged his horse to greater speed.

Many times during the day, Ada had striven to engage the young chief in conversation, but in vain. Scarcely replying to her questions in a monosyllable, he would press on, nor even turn to look upon her, as she followed in his trail.

At last they reached the timber, and heard the gentle flow of running water—like childhood's stifled laughter, when the young play hide-and-seek in pleasant groves.

And there, in a thick growth of trees, by the side of a small stream, Lagona drew up his horse, and springing to the ground, laid Stella gently upon a flowery bank beneath a large tree, and while the two horses were quenching their thirst and cooling their limbs in the stream, brought Stella water in his buffalo-horn hunting-cup—which had never been filled with more baneful liquid.

Oh! had the red-men to this day only drank the fee gift of their Great Father from heaven—had they only drunk that which He gives to the flowers, the tree, to man as well—had they never tasted the accursed fire-water of the pale faces, they would not now be a shadow of what once they were; they would not be now a shattered remnant of a mighty multitude, wandering far from the graves of their sires, from their ancient heritage. No—no—no! Not courage, not art, not right, had

helped the pale-face to drive the red man back—it has been treachery wrought by the demon-aid of fire-water. That accursed poison has burned up their homes, dried up their veins, blasted their race forever!

Ada had dismounted, but to her Lagona did not pay the slightest attention, evidently deeming her able to take care of her-self.

He now built a small fire, and taking a han ful of meal from a bag which had been fastened to his saddle, mixed it with water into a kind of cake, which he speedily baked in the ashes. This, with some dried buffalo-meat, he offered to Stella and Ada.

The former ate because she was very faint and weak, and required strength—the latter, probably because she was hungry. After the women had partaken of food, Lagona ate—a thing which he would not have done before he associated with the whites, for a true warrior would scorn to eat with or after his women. His "lordship" must be first served; then comes the squaw's turn: she only is allowed to be the first in matters of labor.

Meantime, the hungry horses were feasting in the long, tender grass which grew high and thick by the water-side.

Ada did not speak to the unhappy girl who sat near her—once during the day she had made a taunting remark to her, and then Lagona had rebuked her so fiercely, that she did not dare to tempt his anger again. But once in a while she would cast upon her a look, which spoke the deadly intensity of her hate full as forcibly as words could have done. Ay, more so!

Lagona saw this, and saw it with a watchful eye; but he said nothing.

After a rest of two hours, or perhaps a little more, Lagona called his horses, with a low whistle, and prepared to renew his journey.

"Oh, where—where are you carrying me, brave, good Lagona?" asked Stella, tearfully.

"Lagona is neither brave nor good. He is a thief, and is stealing the White Flower from her father. He would not have done it, but her father would have given her to another against the Great Spirit's will!" said the Indian, gloomily, as if he felt that he was doing a wrong which required an excuse.

"Where will Lagona take me?" she asked, tearfully.

"To my tribe, where Lagona can show the White Flower how great he is—his horses cover the plains as thick as trees in the forest, and upon every horse is an armed warrior. The smokes of his lodges darken the sky. Lagona is a great chief!"

"Let him be as good as he is great, and take me back to my father. The Great Spirit is mighty, but He does not strike the flower with His lightning—it is the strong, proud oak which he humbles. The eagle will not harm the dove, but strikes at fiercer game. Why should Lagona harm a helpless girl who never did him wrong?"

Stella's words and her tearful earnestness seemed to have a powerful effect upon Lagona: he hesitated, and turned his head away, as if he studied in vain for a reply. Ada, who caught his eye, made a significant gesture, and looked upward. He understood her idea, and said:

"It is the will of the Great Spirit that the White Flower shall be the wife of Lagona. What the Great Spirit wills, must be done!"

"The Great Spirit never willed it!" cried Stella. "No, never! Will water mix with oil? Will the lamb lie down with the wolf?"

"Yes! So the Great-Spirit book, which your father read me, said!" replied Lagona, triumphantly, alluding to the prophecy of the millennium, which Mr. Delorme had read to him.

Poor Stella said no more, but allowed him to replace her upon his horse—not, however, until unobserved either by him or Ada, she had left a trace by which her friends, if on that trail, might know that she had been there.

There was a look of triumph upon the face of Ada, as they once more dashed away; for at one time she had greatly feared that Lagona was about to relent and turn back with Stella. But now, dashing through the narrow skirt of timber which bordered the stream, he struck across the prairie, in a course nearly west—keeping it as steadily as if he followed a compass-laid route. The horses, refreshed by rest and food, darted on with renewed speed; and poor Stella's heart sunk sadly down, as she

felt that every bound bore her further and further from her home and friends. She hoped, prayed that they might be following to her rescue; but she little dreamed how near they even then were.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Not another mile, with our horses, till they're rested and fed—not another mile, or when we do overtake any one, they'll be so unfit for action, that we'll be crippled out and out!" said Major Ben, in answer to his two companions, Paul and Delorme, as he neared the very range of timber from which Lagona had not been gone more than three or four hours—for the brands of his little fire were yet smoking. For they were urging him to keep upon the evidently freshening trail, without halting.

"We're gaining—here's fire yet!" cried he, as he leaped from his horse, which, loosened, went at once to the water.

"She has been here—she has been here!" shouted Paul, as he picked up from the bank a shred of her lace-fringed dress, which she had torn off and left there.

"Yes, and another woman, and an Indian. Here is a *bona fide* moccasin track!" said Ben, whose keen eye was running over the ground as if it were a picture. "But though there are three of them—there are the tracks of only two horses. I see—one carried double, his track sinks twice as deep in the ground as the other, and here is some of his hair on this musquito bush—it is white!"

"Lagona has got her!" said both Mr. Delorme and Paul, as they heard these words.

"Yes—likely, for this trail heads now straight for the Rio Pecos, and there the Comanches generally lie in the greatest numbers. Some of their most impregnable strongholds are in the Charrate Hills. If he gets there, it will be next to impossible to do anything with my small force."

"Let us press on without delay—they can only be a few miles ahead of us!" urged Paul.

"Young man, when you've lived as long as I have, and trailed as many red-skins as my mother's only son has done, you'll learn that sometimes the greatest haste goes the least distance. Our horses need rest and food—we were to go on now, they would be knocked up, and give out in four or five miles further. But give them two hours' rest and feed, and they're good for a run of thirty or forty miles yet. Take my example, off saddles from your beasts, then eat something and smoke the pipe of patience for a while."

"It is hard to smoke that which I haven't got, but you know best, major—off goes my saddle," said Paul.

"And mine—much as I desire to press on. The experience of the major is our only stay," added Mr. Delorme.

The horses were soon feasting amid the grass, and McCullough having stirred up the fire and added fuel, was making a tin cup of hot coffee, and broiling a slice of bacon for his breakfast, in a very short time.

The planter and Paul, urged to follow his example, did so—more from a desire to sustain their strength than from any appetite which they felt: their eagerness and anxiety destroyed all of that.

And though the gallant chief of the Rangers took things very quietly, he too was full as anxious as they to renew the chase, and watched the animals as they fed, to see when they showed sufficient signs of returning vigor to make it prudent to resaddle them.

After his scanty meal and the never-to-be-forgotten pipe of camp-life, the major climbed one of the tallest trees, in hopes that from his perch he could distinguish further tracks; but when he came down, he shook his head, indicating, thereby, that he had seen nothing of the fugitives or the captive.

But a little over two hours had elapsed before they were again in the saddle, and their nettled horses at once showed the immense benefit of even the temporary rest and refreshment of water and grass which they had received; for without urging severely, they dashed along the trail upon a rapid gallop.

"This is something like!" cried Major Ben, as his eye brightened and his cheek flushed again. "There's nothing like feeling that the horse under you can go on without breaking his heart at every jump. We three are good for thirty Comanches now, on the prairie or in the bush. Two hours and a half ago, ten of 'em could have given us a bad shake for our hair!"

"What's that? Another piece of Stella's dress, as sure as I live!" cried Paul, snatching up the precious fragment from the top of the tall grass, whereon it had lodged.

"The young lady is cool, and seems to feel or know that we're on their trail!" said Major Ben. "That will work well for us, for she'll be ready to take advantage of any chances that offer in the way of escape or otherwise."

"Perhaps they have seen us," said Paul.

"No—their pace has in no way increased any from the start, as far as I can see; but their horses jump shorter as they go on. The horse that carries double must be a good one, but he is tired. I have seen three or four places where he has stumbled. Nothing but weakness will ever make a prairie horse stumble!"

"What is that blue streak, far, far away to the West?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"The Charrate Hills, sir," replied the major. "If the fellows we're after are in cohort with the Comanches, and once get there, our chances for a good fight are tip-top. As to how we'll come out of it, is another question!"

"I pray to Heaven, we may overtake them this side of there!" said Paul.

"I'm not much of a prayin' character—never prayed but once in my life, and that was when I had the tooth-ache—but I'll say *amen* to that, Master Paul!" said the major, in his dry way. "I'd give twenty head of horses to catch 'em on the open plain. If my boys didn't tan 'em out in less than no time, I'd agree to eat mud or chew sand like a Georgia cracker!"

Thus, for several hours, the trio dashed on—the stiff blue outline of the far-off hills growing more broken as they advanced, and the top of a range of timber also beginning to show.

"That timber is on the Pecos river," said the Ranger, pointing to it, "and I shouldn't wonder if they camped there to-night. If they do, some of 'em may wake up in kingdom come, without knowin' who it was that sent 'em there!"

"What specks are those off to the right?" asked Paul, whose anxious and ever-wandering eye had detected some moving objects in the direction which he named.

"Halt, and don't move, horse or man, till I see!" said the major, quickly. And he unslung a small field telescope, from his back, and brought it up to his eye.

"What are they—friends or foes?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"Six of my own men, on a trail—they're pushing their horses—it must be fresh," said the major. "They are diverging toward this course—I'll stake my rifle against a shot-gun, that we overtake the party we're after on the Pecos to-night, without they see us first, and keep on without camping. If they do, they'll be in the hills by morning. But if they don't see us, they'll think nobody is after them, and rest and feed there."

Renewing their course, the party rode on, and within an hour were not only joined by the six first seen, but in sight of more than half of the whole party of Rangers. Seeing that all of the trails led to one point, the timber range on the Pecos, and as they were now very rapidly nearing it, the major deemed it prudent to halt his men, and sent out some of the best mounted to cross the trails to the right and left, and thus intercept the others as they were coming up. By the main trail where they were, they could see that a large portion of those whom they were pursuing had united.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

They were on the Rio Pecos at last—Lagona and his hapless captive—Ada and her entire band. A grand old forest was that which guarded the banks of the bright and rushing water—and glad were the exhausted riders and their almost worn-out horses, when they halted within it.

"We'll camp here, will we not, Miss Ada?" asked Malerson, as they drew up, after their long and fatiguing ride.

"That will be as Lagona advises," said she.

"I don't care what he says—our horses are completely stove up, and can't budge another mile. If we're followed, I'm ready for fight—but as to traveling further till we've ate, and drunk, and slept, and our horses had a bite, I'll not do it for any heathen that runs! As I say, so say all! Don't you, boys?"

"Yes—Captain Jack, yes!" was the general reply.

"Very good—you sleep, eat—get drunk, if you like! We will rest, and then go on!" said Lagona, with a look of contempt on those who gave out so easily.

And he rode away a little further, apart from the rest, where he dismounted and prepared refreshments for Stella and Ada, while their horses were feeding.

Malerson and his men, without the least sign of prudence, built up their camp-fires, stacked their arms, unsaddled their horses, turned them out to feed, and then hastened to refresh themselves.

"We're clear of danger now, boys—old Ben McCullough himself, never would follow us so far, let alone the planter, and such a scurvy set as he has around his rancho:—we're safe, let's make a night of it. We've lots of rum left, and soon we'll make a dash for some place where we can get more! Here's to our noble selves!"

And his upturned flask did honor (?) to his sentiment.

All was now lively in the robber camp. The men were cooking, eating, and drinking to their hearts' content.

After a delay of little more than an hour, Lagona called in his horse, and that of Ada; and, without saying a word to the carousing crew, rode away up the stream, with his prize.

"By-bye, Miss Ada. We'll be along after you when the sun's up!" shouted Malerson, half drunk, as he saw them go off. And then he took another strong pull at his flask, and, wrapping himself in his blanket, lay down to sleep.

A great camp that for men in danger—not a sentinel posted—not a man who did not, as soon as he was done eating and drinking, follow the example of their leader in crime and iniquity.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Don—don't be in such a deuce of a hurry, boys! Who is that a kickin' me, their lawfully 'lected captain?" grunted Jack Malerson, some hours after he had laid down to sleep.

Aroused by some unmercifully severe kicks, he now learned two facts—one of them of astounding importance, so far as he was concerned. It was broad daylight, first; and next, every man of his band was secured, and tied, and his greatest dread, Ben McCullough, was standing over him, with the ropes ready, to fix him in the same way, as soon as he gained a sitting posture.

"Lord! don't kick so hard, old fellow. Remember, you wear boots!" said Malerson, as an expression of stupid terror, mingled with pain, came out upon his sottish countenance.

"Get up, you infernal scoundrel, and let me rope you, then!" said the major.

"You might have done it while I was asleep, without making such a fuss about it!" growled Malerson. "Here, don't tie my hands till I've taken my morning bitters!" he added, raising his flask to his lips.

"Murder! It's all gone—I must have emptied it last night!" he groaned, dropping the now useless friend upon the ground, and submitting his arms to the rope, which was used to tie them behind his back.

"Ah! you here, Paul, my boy—you here, and see your poor old father treated this 'ere way—kicked, cuffed, and tied up like a pig to be carted to market?" said he, recognizing his son.

"I am here: but in a robber and villain like yourself, recognize no relationship!" said the young man, bitterly.

"How unnatural! What a wicked boy! But you'll do your poor old dad one favor won't you? See if some of the boys haven't got a little rum left, and give me a moistener, to drive away the blue-devils. Now do, boys; and I'll forgive the rest of your conduct!"

Paul turned away in utter disgust from him, without attending to his request.

"Where is my daughter, you double-dyed villain—where is my daughter?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"When I ask questions and want 'em answered, I generally use a civil tongue!" said the captain, coolly.

"For Heaven's sake, tell me where, my daughter is!" groaned the wretched father.

"Ah, now you talk! I've a respect for heaven, though I never expect to get there. Give me a drink of liquor, and I'll tell, to the best of my knowledge, where your daughter is!" replied Malerson.

A flask was brought, and applied to the old

rascal's lips, for he was so tied that he could not help himself. After swallowing until he was in some danger of choking, he paused; and Mr. Delorme then repeated his question.

"Well, as far as I'm capable of knowing, old gentleman," said Malerson, as soon as he could get his breath to reply, "your daughter is with a mighty cute Indian, that calls himself Lagona, and just as smart a white girl as ever put on trousers—one Miss McAlpin, a former sweetheart of my ungrateful son, that Master Paul, there. They left here shortly after we encamped—and that is probably six or seven hours ago—and they were making for the hills; where, if you want to lose your top-knots, you can undoubtedly be accommodated, according to the latest Comanche fashion! Now, sir, I've paid for that liquor; and when you want any further information upon anything in particular, or almost everything in general, old Jack Malerson stands ready to accommodate you on the same terms!"

"Our main object is yet beyond us, even though we have secured these wretches!" said Mr. Delorme. "How soon can we resume the trail, and yet try to overtake my daughter?" asked the planter of the major.

"As soon as I have picked out a trusty guard for the prisoners, and selected the freshest horses!" said the major. "I am full as anxious as you to overtake the red fiend before he gets to the hills. Once there, and he will give us more trouble than you have yet even dreamed of!"

"Both Paul and myself are ready now!" replied the planter.

"Let your horses breathe while they can—look to your arms, and refresh yourselves all you can, for you have work ahead of you, and will need all you can get!" said the Ranger, as he hastened to pick out his guard, and arrange for the continuation of the chase.

These matters were soon attended to, and with thirty picked men, who laid aside every article, even to their blankets, which might add to the burden of their horses, retaining only their arms, he mounted, and took Lagona's now well-known and clearly-defined trail. Before he left, however, he charged the lieutenant, whom he left in command of the guard, to shoot the prisoners like so many dogs, if they attempted to escape. "And," said he, "don't miss that hang-dog looking villain, their leader. I want his skin to make a saddle-cover of!"

"Mine's no more a dog-skin than your own, old rum-head!" shouted Malerson, turning almost black with anger.

The Ranger smiled grimly, and, driving his spurs into his horse's flanks, rode off at the head of his little column, at full speed.

Gallant leader of gallant men! How noble he looked in his free and careless dress, mounted superbly, and armed to the teeth. His face expressive of courage, honor, and every manly attribute, without the failings common to so-called better men.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

What a magnificent scene! The sun was just gilding the great black and gray cliffs of the Sierras Charrate, upon which, like dwarfy sentinels, stood a few gnarled and curiously-shaped trees. And down through a narrow gorge—deep, dark, and terrible in its very wildness, rushed a stream of foaming, flashing, roaring water. And into this cavernous gorge, on a path so narrow that there was only delicate and scarce tenable footing for a single horse at a time, led the trail of Lagona.

In front of this the bold Ranger halted, for though all was still and dark beyond, he had too often met the wily red man, not to know that there was danger in such silence.

"He has chosen a safe hiding-place, and that is the worst pass in the whole range!" muttered McCullough to Paul and Delorme, as he halted at the head of his men before the gorge.

"Have you entered it before?" asked Delorme.

"Yes—once, after we had lost nearly half our men; and then it was defended by only four warriors. We charged on foot. It was terrible; we lost twenty men—good and true ones—for four paltry red-skin scalps. Once within the mountains, there is the prettiest spot of valley land that you ever laid your eyes on—ten thousand head of horses could pasture there; and it is likely that Lagona's main camp is in there, since he has steered so direct for the pass!"

"Most likely it is guarded!"

"Without a doubt it is!" said the Ranger. "Probably it is never left without a sentinel; but our first warning, if we advance, will be our faces full of arrows!"

"Let me be the first to lead the way!" said Paul, eagerly.

And the first to fall when you're engaged to be married, and on the hunt after your bride!" cried Major Ben. "I reckon that isn't quite the game for you! But lend me your pocket-handkerchief, if it's white, young man. I'll try and see if there's any chance of a parley. Where we cannot take, we may buy—where we can't frighten, we may bargain!"

The handkerchief was produced, and, affixing it to a ram-rod, the major rode slowly forward. But he had not ridden twenty paces, before Lagona himself, with a white flag on a lance, appeared, and at his back as many armed warriors as could be packed along the narrow trail.

"The pale-face has come far enough—what does he want?" asked the proud chief, in a haughty tone.

"The pale-face planter is weeping for his daughter, whom you have stolen away! Lagona is a great chief, a mighty brave, and should scorn to be a thief!" said McCullough, who knew well on what points to touch the proud nature of an Indian—how best, also, to flatter him.

"Lagona is not a thief!" replied the chief, sullenly. The Great Spirit bade him take the daughter of the pale-face, and he has done it. She shall be his wife, and the mother of great braves!"

"Dog of an Indian, give her to me, or fight me here, single-handed, till one or both die!" shouted Mr. Delorme.

"You are an old man—my ears are closed to your words—I will not fight you!" said Lagona, quietly.

"Fight me! I am not old—fight me! you red coward!" shouted Paul.

"Boy, you are a fool! Go, and find another squaw!" said Lagona, contemptuously.

"Yes, for your Stella is appropriated!" cried Ada McAlpin, advancing to the side of the Comanche chief.

"Fiend! All of your band is captured, and shall hang!" cried Paul, furious with anger.

"So, a son will hang his father? Well, no better can be expected from a perjured wretch like you!" cried Ada, scornfully.

"What ransom will you take for your captive?" asked McCullough, cautioning Paul and Mr. Delorme not to interfere further with his plans.

"Fill up this gorge with gold, and I will not give her up!" cried Lagona, angrily. "If you want her, come and take her. But you had better go back; more than three thousand braves ask for your scalps. I do not wish blood to run; therefore, take a friend's warning, and go back."

"Will you not attack us, if we camp, and take a night to think of it?" asked the cool and politic Ranger.

"No, not without you attempt to pass the gorge; if you do, your blood is ours, and not your own!" said the chief.

"We will camp, and ask the Great Spirit if we shall turn back or not," said McCullough.

"It is well," said Lagona; and as he lowered his flag and waved his hand, his warriors fell back; and soon nothing but black rocks, rugged trees, and rushing water, could be seen before the Rangers' position.

Selecting a nook in the cliff near by, where they could only be assailed from one point, the major, Ben McCullough, ordered his men to encamp.

"For God's sake, why this delay, sir?" asked Paul. "Why do we not attack the Indians at once?"

"Young man, life is worth something to others, if it is valueless to you. I have never been noted for any very extraordinary care of my own; but when I lose it, I want an equivalent. Now, I consider myself worth, at least, one hundred of those red niggers. I've laid out sixty or seventy, at odd spells, it is true—but if I tried to take the remaining thirty or forty in this pass, I'd be very apt to lose my life before I'd got six on my score. To attack them in front won't pass; to take 'em in the rear would require a guide from themselves, if there is a pass—which I doubt, for we couldn't find one when I was here before. And such a guide couldn't be found easily—the breed of Arnold never got mixed with the redskins. I know just what I'm about; and if you expect ever to

see your love again, leave matters to me. I've not given up hope yet; but I'll not let my rashness spoil all the chances," said the major.

"God bless you, my noble friend! Forgive me, and think only how I feel when she whom I value more than life is in the power of that savage," said Paul.

"I feel for you, lad—I feel for you; and, more than that, I'll risk my hair to get Miss Stella back for you; but I must have my own way to do it in."

"We will not interfere with any of your plans, major," said Mr. Delorme. "Command us in all things, and we obey."

"It is well. I will give no orders that will involve you in perils where I do not lead," said McCullough, moving around to see that his men were comfortably bestowed.

"Will there be no danger of the Indians sallying out and attacking us?" asked Paul Malerson.

"Not while Lagona's word is passed, and my flag is flying," said the Ranger. "I would not trust a yellow-skinned Mexican, if he had sworn to a truce; but an Indian, as brave and proud as Lagona, will not tell a lie."

"He stole my daughter, after he had promised not to," said Delorme.

"Not until he had left your roof, refusing presents and favors from you or Paul," said the major.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Back, not a quarter of a mile beyond the dark and yawning mouth, that narrow and fearful pass opened into a very lap of paradise. Hemmed in upon every side, there lay a valley of many hundred acres in extent, fertile almost beyond conception—certainly beyond adequate description. There were broad savannahs, upon which great herds of horses and cattle were feeding; fields, also, of grain and fruit, fenced in with hedges of thorny cactus; and the smoke of hundreds of unique lodges rose in the otherwise transparent and balmy atmosphere.

Children—the dusky scions of the Lipan and the Comanche—could be seen playing around in the pleasant avenues; mounted warriors, armed cap-à-pie, rode to and fro, exercising themselves, and training their wild steeds, and groups of women, here and there, were using that tireless weapon of offence and defence, so peculiarly their own—the tongue!

At the ravine, or pass, from its inner end to very near the outside, a strong guard of watchful sentinels was posted; and it would seem impossible that the camp should be surprised, except by one who descended from the clouds.

In the centre of this camp, or village, was a lodge, much larger than the rest, arranged with several compartments. The shields and plumes outside and upon top of this, denoted that it belonged to the chief, and to this Lagona returned, after his interview with Major McCullough, under the truce flag.

Before the entrance, stood two sentinels—showing that any attempt made by Stella to leave when the chief was absent, would be prevented.

In the inner apartment, seated in an attitude, and with a look of hopeless despair, was the poor girl, when Lagona and Ada McAlpin returned. She looked up, with her large, tearful eyes, when he entered; and an expression of mournful reproach from her went deeper, far, into his heart than would the most bitter reproaches, the most indignant rebukes.

The food which had been placed before her was untasted—the fruit untouched; her eyes were red with weeping; her pale face and sunken cheeks told how much agony she suffered.

"If the White Flower does not eat, she will die," said the chief, sadly.

"Of what use is life to me, when I am deprived of liberty?" replied Stella, mournfully. "If you cage a bird, it will pine away and die."

"If the White Flower will swear, in the name of the Great Spirit, that she will not try to go away from my village, she shall not be confined or guarded," said Lagona.

"She cannot do so! If I can escape, I will—if I cannot, I will die; and go up to the Great Spirit, and say that Lagona murdered me!"

The Comanche chief seemed troubled. Evidently, he did not wish to treat Stella harshly—perhaps, had he been left entirely to him.

self, would have been willing to give her up to her father, rather than to see her suffer thus; but Ada, wily and smart, had gained considerable ascendancy over him, by her pretended power of dreams; and this, of course, was used to further her own desires in regard to the punishment of Stella, so far as she could get without arousing his sympathy too much for his captive. And it was her delight, if she could say or do anything to torture the already too wretched girl.

"How would Miss Stella like to see her father, and sweet, dear, Master Paul Malerson?" she asked, in a sneering tone, while Lagona was for a moment absent.

Stella made no answer; but the thought thus cruelly awakened drew tears from her eyes.

"They inquired after your health, a little while ago—would have been glad to see you; but we told them you didn't receive company during the honeymoon," continued Ada.

"Oh, heavens! are they near?" sobbed Stella. "Have you seen my father? Do not deceive me. I forgive your hatred and your wrongs; but do not deceive me. Is my father near?"

"I saw him less than a half-hour ago; and he was very angry because he could not see you!" said Ada, with a mocking smile.

"On your soul, you did? You are not uttering a falsehood?"

"On my soul, I did! I wouldn't take the trouble to lie for you!"

"Oh, thank God—thank God! Lagona will not see me die when they are near. There is some manhood in his soul! Thank God!—thank God!" cried Stella, almost wild with excitement.

"What is the matter with the White Flower?" asked Lagona, sternly, coming in at this time.

"Oh, if there is mercy in your heart, in the name of the Great Spirit, I implore you to take me to my father!" cried Stella, throwing herself at Lagona's feet.

"Have you been telling her that we have seen her father?" asked Lagona, with a frown, turning to Ada.

"She asked me questions, and I could not lie," said Ada, in a humble tone.

"You are a fool!" said the angry chief; and he turned upon his heel and left the lodge, without giving any answer to the request of poor Stella.

CHAPTER XL.

It was night once more. The camp of the Rangers was a gloomy and silent one, for the men were tired; and though they generally rejoiced in the thought of peril, or an approaching battle, they did not now—for they knew, if they had to fight, it would be with every disadvantage of position, and, probably, with overwhelming odds against them.

Very shortly after darkness set in, the major withdrew behind a screen of horse-blankets, which he had caused to be raised something like a tent, for the use of himself, Mr. Delorme and Paul—and, to the utter astonishment of the two last-named individuals, began to divest himself entirely of his clothing.

"Why, major, in Heaven's name, what is the matter?" asked Mr. Delorme, in astonishment.

"Surely, he is crazy!" said Paul.

"Not crazy, but a little foolish, young man. I'm going to get that wife of yours, that is to be, out of the Comanche camp to-night, or lose my hair in trying!" said the major, coolly, and he produced a bag, from which he took some black paint, and began to cover himself with it, from head to foot.

"Turn in and help me, gentlemen; I've got to personate the devil—and, like some women who play the devil in paint, require considerable color," said McCullough.

Paul assisted, as soon as he saw what was required; and soon the Major was as black as the ace of spades, from head to foot. Having done this, he now produced a quantity of phosphorus, with which he caused Paul to draw upon his person the full semblance of a skeleton, death's-head and all—making, when finished, a figure that, when in the dark, would be apt to shake the nerves of the strongest and bravest men.

With nothing but a strong bandage about his waist and hips, in which a brace of revolvers and a knife were concealed, he was nearly ready for the exhibition which he had planned.

The next thing which he took was several of the strong lassoes always carried at the saddle bows of the Rangers. These he knotted together in a continuous rope, and then announced himself ready for his work.

"If it is not against your wishes, I should really like to know what you intend to do, Major?" asked Delorme, as he gazed upon the fearful, scarce human-looking figure before him.

"I'm going to scale the mountain, by a kind of pass—which I remember having seen when we were here before—or a kind of opening on this side, by which I can get to its top, and look down into the valley, where the red devils camp. One of our scouts went up when we had our fight here; and in that way we found out that there were but four Indians in the gorge, then—and we let down men to take them in the rear; and in that way tanned 'em out, after they had laid out nearly half of our company. After I get to the top, I'm going to lower myself away into the camp; and if they don't run, when they see a fiery skeleton coming down from above, on 'em, they're braver than white men. If they run—as I'm almost sure they will—I'll spirit your Stella out, safe here into your arms; and, my men being ready with the horses, daylight will find us a long way from here."

"The plan is excellent, yet full of danger to yourself. If it miscarries, you are lost."

"Then revenge me—that is all that I ask."

"Cannot I go with you?" asked Paul.

"No; one devil is enough at a time. Stay here, and be ready to run or fight, as need directs, when the time comes. Freshen up the phosphoric marks again. Wet the stuff a little—I must blaze out all that I can."

The Rangers—having been cautioned, and informed of the fearful and perilous feat which the major was about to undertake—made no remarks when he came out, ready for his work. He looked the fiend, indeed, all over. A musquito fork, or branch, had been affixed, like horns, to his head; and this, too, was rubbed with phosphorus, until it looked like prongs of fire.

Shaking both Paul and Delorme by the hand, and uttering a low, but firm, farewell, the noble-hearted and daring Ranger commenced the ascent of the almost inaccessible mountain. Although the place where he commenced to climb could not be seen from the mouth of the gorge, where he had a guard stationed, it was visible to all of his camp. And silently the men looked upon that skeleton of fire, as it appeared, slowly scrambling up among the rocky cliffs—now half hidden among the scraggy bushes, then coming out bolder, when it stood upon a barren spot.

Slowly, but steadily, on it moved, until it seemed to have reached the top, where it lingered for a moment, and then disappeared.

The planter and Paul now had their horses, as well as that of the Major, brought in ready for use, and the Rangers also prepared to fly or fight, as necessity should determine. Thus, they waited in a suspense almost as terrible as the adventure.

CHAPTER XLI.

At the same hour when the major was preparing for his wild and dangerous adventure, Lagona was pacing to and fro, restlessly, in the front compartment of his lodge, listening to the heart-breaking sobs of poor Stella, whose anguish only increased when she thought how near her father and lover were, yet how powerless to help her; for she knew what an immense force the chief had at his command, also how impregnable was his position. These, he had, in his pride of power, shown to her when he was received by his people, and hoped that, seeing this, she would the more readily yield to the fate which he really believed was her destiny by the will of the Great Spirit.

The Comanche camp was very still—he had so ordered it, and the usual camp-fires burned dimly—but now and then the guard-fires down the ravine blazed up brightly as the watchful sentinels threw on fresh fuel. According to the usual custom, every warrior's horse was picketed by his lodge, and his weapons were ready to be seized at a moment's notice, in case of an alarm in the night. It is an Indian's pride and care never to be caught napping, on any occasion, or under any circumstances.

Ada McAlpin, with a heartlessness which only hate had frozen her into—for naturally she was neither cruel nor wickedly inclined—had cast herself down to rest near the mourning child of Delorme, and paid no attention to her sorrows.

Lagona felt badly. His heart was heavy. He loved the "White Flower" too well not to feel for her sufferings. Yet, he believed he had only obeyed the will of the Great Spirit, in carrying her off—he even regarded the duty, as he deemed it, more than his own feelings of love.

"If the White Flower dies, like a bird in its cage, it will be the fault of Lagona!" he muttered. "And if he lets her go back to her people, then the Great Spirit will be angry, because the dream which he gave is not fulfilled. The path before Lagona is dark—he does not know which way to travel."

The soliloquy of the young chief was suddenly interrupted by a yell, so wild, so fearful, so unearthly, that it did not seem to have come from mortal lips. Even he, Indian as he was, started and trembled. Again it came, wild and demon-like, upon the still night air, and cries of alarm resounded through the village.

Lagona sprang to the opening of his lodge, where his noble white charger stood, quivering with fear at his picket near the camp-fire. And, as he glanced toward the mountain-top in front of him, he saw a sight which was striking terror into a thousand warrior hearts at the same instant—a sight which froze the blood in his own veins, for he had never seen the like before.

A figure, seeming to be formed of fire, was dancing upon the crest of a cliff, where he had never known a human foot to tread, and uttering yells, far more wild and terrible than ever came from a red man's throat. The warrior, who never had shrunk from a mortal foe, trembled now. And his people, who, like himself, had hurried forth from their lodge, when they heard this monster of the night, now stood, speechless and motionless, gazing upon it—not knowing what to do, or whither to turn. Suddenly it was seen descending the perpendicular face of the black mountain, where no human being could, for a moment, find a foothold.

With wild cries of terror, the warriors—as well as the women and children—fled within their lodges, or hid away among the rocks and bushes—for they believed that a spirit of destruction was upon them.

Utterly unmanned, Lagona sunk to the ground, wrapped his blanket about his head, and awaited what he believed to be his fate. No thought for a moment entered his terror-filled brain, that a human being could have descended from that mountain-top—he deemed himself lost, and his tribe a doomed people.

The fiery figure reached the ground, and still continuing its terrible and unearthly yells, bounded through the village. No one stood up to oppose its progress—terror reigned supreme everywhere.

On, on, it came, to the lodge of Lagona; it bounded past his snow-white steed, which plunged and snorted in fear—it leaped over the prostrate body of the Indian, and entered the lodge, which was dimly lighted with the Indian lamp.

Almost intuitively, it seemed to know the spot where Stella lay, and bounded to her side. She screamed faintly, for it was a terrible look to see.

"Hush! girl! I'm a friend—your father's friend—yield yourself to me, and you are saved!" said a low voice, in her ear; and in the next moment, she found herself lifted in strong arms, and borne out from the lodge.

But another ear heard those words; and although at first struck dumb with terror, when she saw the hideous being who entered, Ada McAlpin in an instant comprehended that this was some plan of rescue; and with a shriek of anger and of warning upon her lips, she rushed to the front of the lodge, just in time to see him, who had borne Stella out, lift her to the back of Lagona's horse, loose its lasso from the picket, spring upon its back, and with the double burden, turn the frightened steed's head toward the gorge, and to the prairie beyond.

And none there were to stay the path of the fiery figure—all who yet looked upon its dread course were paralyzed with terror.

"Up fool—up coward! They have stolen your bride away! Why are you trembling

here?" cried Ada, as she spurned Lagona with her foot, and strove to rouse him from the spot where he crouched in his fear.

"The Evil Spirit has come upon us!" said Lagona. "The Evil Spirit has come upon us!"

"Yes; in the shape of a pale-face; and your best horse and your captive is gone! A pretty Indian are you, to let a pale-face beat you in this way!" said Ada, scornfully. "The Evil Spirit talked first-rate English, and told Stella Delorme that he was a friend of her father, and would take her to him."

Lagona uncovered his head, and caught a glimpse of his white-steed, flying like the wind out through the gorge, along a path which it knew full well, but which no strange horse could have gone over at a faster pace than a walk. And while he looked, the Ranger's shout of triumph, and the well-known crack of the revolver, came back upon his astonished ears.

"Where is the White Flower?" he asked.

"In her father's arms, by this time, while you and all your boasted braves have been on your knees, scared to death by nothing but one poor rascal of a pale-face!" said Ada.

At first, Lagona could not realize that this was so. He rushed into the inner lodge, and found that Stella really was gone. Then, snatching his weapons, he rushed to the front again, and pealed out his war-cry loud and long. But never before were his warriors so slow and faint in their reply—never before so dilatory in gathering to his side.

When they did gather, he knew not what to say—he could not rebuke them for a fear which had taken possession of his own breast. Nor did he like to acknowledge how he had been duped; although he fully comprehended how it was, after Ada had further explained, and told him the precise words used by the one who bore Stella off. He had sent a warrior to the mountain-side, where the fiery figure had descended, and a piece of the lasso had shown him how the descent had been made.

"The White Flower which the Great Spirit bade me take, has been carried off by an Evil Spirit—she is in the hands of her friends! But Lagona will not give her up. We must go after them, and take their scalps, and bring her back. Lagona has spoken!"

The answering shout of his warriors was feeble, for they were not yet relieved of their terror; but they began to gather in and mount their horses; and soon, Lagona was upon another steed—but not such a one as his favorite, for its equal had not been seen upon the plains.

CHAPTER XLII.

When the major had lifted Stella upon the back of the plunging steed of Lagona, and loosened its rein, and himself mounted, he whispered another word or two of hope and encouragement in her ear, and then headed the frightened animal for the gorge. Wildly it bounded on—the guard-fires marking and lighting the way; while the terrified sentinels either shrunk back from the path or fell upon their faces, helpless from terror.

At a pace which, with a horse unused to the perilous path, he never would have dared to keep, McCullough thundered through the gorge, firing one of his pistols as a signal when he neared the spot where he knew he would meet his own men; and in as little time—ay, less—than I have taken to describe it, he was out upon the free prairie, and bounding toward his own little camp.

The next moment, Stella was in the arms of her father and Paul, weeping and sobbing for joy; while the major, without pausing to remove the paint from his person, was hurriedly putting on the garments which he had laid off when he undertook his adventure.

"Oh, major, what do we not owe you? My life, my whole plantation, shall be yours!" cried Mr. Delorme.

"You'll lose the first, and never reach the last, if you stop here for talking," said the major; and he ordered one of his men to bring his own horse. "You can still ride the white, Miss Stella," he said. "He must be tired with his long journey; but you are light weight, and he must carry you. I will keep a hand on his rein."

The Rangers now quickly gathered to the side of their leader.

"Mount, men, mount, and away! We must put many a league between this spot and where

we are at daylight; for we'll have thousands upon our trail. Loose reins and busy spurs—keep close, and follow me!" he cried.

With Stella on the swift horse of Lagona, the major's hand upon its rein, and her father and Paul riding close by her side, the gallant band now swept away swiftly, and in silence—uttering no shouts, speaking no words—the hoofs of their horses scarce making a sound upon the grassy earth. On, on—like a black shadow sweeping over the face of the earth—they passed, leaving the rushing Rio Pecos and the gloomy hills of the Charrate far in their rear.

The rescue had been effected. And never in tale of ancient chivalry, never in record of belted knighthood, never in history of modern bravery, had the story of a more daring deed been found—never greater peril met, or more gallantry overcome, than there and then.

It was a long time before Lagona could get his terrified warriors ready for service; and when, at last, he led them through the gorge, the day was dawning. He rode to the spot where the Rangers had encamped; but only the smouldering embers of their fires were left to show that they had been there, and had been gone, also, for hours.

With a bitter look of anger and disappointment, Lagona, at the head of over a thousand warriors, took their trail. His horses were fleet and fresh, and he felt no doubt but that he would overtake them.

Therefore, urging his horse to its utmost speed, he led the way, followed by his now reassured warriors—who, as they rode on, seemed to forget the terrors of the night in the hope of the scalps which the trail they followed promised to so large a body.

CHAPTER XLIII.

The Rangers, and those whom they escorted, kept on until the blue of dawn began to lighten the blackness of night, without for a moment lessening their speed; but when light came, and they could see about them, the major began to spare his horses, so as not utterly to break their wind, and render them useless, in case of a forced encounter on the prairie.

In their rear, far away, could still be seen the black, rough hills of the Charrate, and in the distant eastern horizon the fringe of trees could be distinguished which marked the spot where they had captured Malerson and his gang.

"Do you think that we will be pursued?" asked Mr. Delorme of the major.

"Yes," was the reply—"probably not till daylight; but surely then would such a warrior as Lagona take our trail. He probably has by this time seen the lasso which helped me down the mountain, and found the knife which I dropped when I cut his horse loose from the picket, and understands what kind of a devil he had in his camp last night. I can't help laughing when I remember how the red wretches dropped, and scattered, and hid their heads when I dashed in among them: five hundred of my Rangers with their six-shooters in hand never would have begun to terrify them so. Even Lagona, whom we all well know to be as brave as a lion, fell to the earth, and, wrapping his head in his blanket, lay and trembled when I passed over him. When I rode through the gorge, some of the sentinels jumped into the water—some dropped as if they were shot. A more frightened set of cursers I never saw before, and never expect to see again while I live. I shall laugh about it till I'm white-headed with age, if I'm so unfortunate as to live that long. Lagona will never forgive me for his fright. If he were our prisoner, he would kill himself in very shame."

And the brave, noble-hearted major laughed loud and long, as he thought of the ludicrous terror of the Indians.

"I should have been as much terrified as they were, had such a looking figure come upon me in the night, and I not aware of what it was," said Mr. Delorme.

"Your daughter was not terrified in the least," said the major. "She made scarce a breath of outcry when she saw me, and was as silent as a mouse when I took her up to bring her off."

"The hopeless are dead to terror, I believe," said Stella, with a smile. "I felt that I was in Lagona's power, and not even death would have added to my terror."

"A few more adventures like this will get

you used to the Indians. I begin almost to envy you your perils and escapes. You'll throw us Rangers completely in the background," said the major.

"Ah, sir, were it not for you, my adventures had been ended before now. I can never forget by whom I have been rescued."

"Have a care, fair lady, or your compliments will raise Master Paul's jealousy," said the major, with a smile. "He is terribly jealous—wanted to fight Lagona single-handed—would hardly trust me to go alone after you."

"All the jealousy which I ever feel where you are concerned, major, can be put in your pipe and smoked out," said Paul.

"Oh, ho! I see! You think that I'm like a bear—so rough and ugly, that I can't wake up the tender passion. But mark you, Master Paul—a bear is great on hugging."

"If you always hug to so good a purpose as you did last night, you will win applause—not blame," said Paul, with a laugh.

And he rode up by the side of Stella, and, for the hundredth time at least, pressed her hand, and looked the love and joy which no words could then express.

CHAPTER XLIV.

By the time the sun had reached its meridian, McCullough and his party had nearly got to the fringe of timber before spoken of, where he had left his gang of prisoners under guard. But, while they were yet a mile or more distant, the keen eyes of the Ranger chief detected a long line of dark specks far away in the rear—a black and swiftly-rising mass; and, as he pointed to it, he said:

"There will be hair lost before sunset."

"Are we pursued?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"Yes; the whole horde of Comanches and Lipans is after us. They probably number thousands; and, if we can't keep out of their way, they'll run us down by the mere weight of numbers. But they've got to eat lead first," said the Ranger, grating his teeth.

"Our horses are already tired with many days' travel: to escape them by flight will be impossible!" said Paul. "Their horses are all fresh!"

"That's so," said the major; "but I'll tell you what you can do, Master Paul—your horse is a good one, and the one Miss Stella rides can't be caught by any four legs on the prairie. You ride on, steering east, for dear life, with her and her father, and we'll hold back and fight the red devils, and check the pursuit, till you get a start which you can keep."

"Major McCullough, you do not know me!" said Paul, hastily, while the red blood mounted through his cheek, and up to his very temples. "I love Miss Delorme, and I know that she loves me—but she would despise me as much as I would myself, if I left you to fight while I tried to escape! No, sir—I do not leave you, but share your fate, whatever it is!"

"You are right, Paul; that is an answer which makes you more dear to me than ever!" said Stella, in a low tone.

"Well—perhaps it will be all the better for us to keep together," said the major. "Spur up, men—drive your nags to the uttermost; we'll change horses again when we get to the woods!"

The Rangers obeyed; and the party, keeping on at their topmost speed, soon reached the spot where Jack Malerson and his gang had been left.

That worthy and his band were in a precious ill-humor—stiff and sore with the bonds that confined them; but all safe.

"Hurry and get in the fresh horses, and change your saddles!" cried McCullough, to his men; "we've no time to lose here!"

"So you've got the girl, have you? I s'pose you'll let us go now, won't you?" asked Malerson.

"No—curse you, no! We'll leave you here for the Comanches to play with!" said the major, bitterly. "Secure all the arms and ammunition, men; we shall need every ounce before night. I'm thinking!"

"For Heaven's sake, untie us before you go!" groaned the captain. "I'm almost dead!"

"When you're quite so, the world will be no loser, and hell one devil richer!" said the major, as he mounted a fresh horse, which one of his men led up to him.

"If you won't let me loose, do let one of your men give me a sip of rum—do it, if

you've a single bowel of compassion left!" said Malerson, piteously.

McCullough paid no attention to this appeal, but riding around, and seeing that his men were all ready for a start, and all mounted upon fresh horses but Stella, whose tireless steed was still more than a match for any in the party. He gave the word to move on, and once more, at top-speed, they dashed away, hoping almost against hope to distance the blood-hounds in their rear, and to reach the settlements in time to receive help, before they could be overtaken.

Away—away, scarce pausing to glance behind them, they flew, and far in the rear, like a howling gang of hungered wolves, pressed their fierce pursuers.

CHAPTER XLV.

"Well, if this isn't a cursed fix to be left in—tied up for a bait for a lot of mad Comanches to prey on—If we were loose, our horses dead stove up, and never a chance to run! This comes of yielding to petticoat government, and lettin' a woman have her way! She's bound sure to lead a man straight to the devil, or next door, at any rate!"

Thus growled old Jack Malerson, as he saw the Rangers ride away.

"You've nobody to blame but yourself, cap'n! You brought the gal amongst us, and was first to say, elect her queen!" said one of his men.

"That's so!" growled another. "If we'd minded our own legitimate business, and cracked cribs, picked pockets, and cut throats decently at home, we wouldn't be in this cursed scrape now!"

"I know it's my fault, men—I'm not denying it," said the captain. "But if old Jack Malerson ever does get out of this scrape, if you catch him in such another, you may fry him into soap-fat! I'd give a cool thousand to be in the Old Arcade, over a bowl of good punch about this time o' day! I never was so dry in all my life!"

The captain sighed—a deep, long sigh of misery. To be dry without the power of alleviating his peculiar thirst, was to him the very depth of wretchedness.

"I wonder how they got their girl?" he continued, after a pause. "They didn't look as if they'd been fighting, and just as many came back as went. I counted 'em! I wonder what's come of Miss Ada? If she's with the Comanches that are after the Rangers, she may save us, for she had the chief all right on her side; but if she isn't, Heaven help us—for nobody else will!"

"There they come—Jerusalem Bob, what a gang!" cried one of the men.

"A half-hour longer will show what's to become of us!" groaned Malerson. "We might about as well be dead as tied up here, a sufferin' this way! Nothing to drink—not even a chew of tobacco!"

"My top-knot begins to feel uneasy, cap'n—I'm awfully afeared them yelpin' fiends will want our hair!" said the man nearest to Malerson.

"I shouldn't wonder," said the latter, with a sympathetic sigh.

The immense body of Comanches were now in full view, tearing along over the prairie, at the utmost speed of their horses. Riding foremost of all came Lagona; and though he paid little heed to her, Ada McAlpin—probably deeming it her safest position—kept close by his side. He rode up to the spot where Malerson and his gang lay huddled up in a heap, and a grim smile of satisfaction flitted over his face, as he saw their situation.

"Ought to get drunk and go to sleep another time, eh?" he muttered.

"Good Mr. Lagona, tell your braves not to kill and scalp us!" said Malerson, trembling for his life, as the ferocious braves of the tribe dashed up in their war-paint.

"They've better work than to scalp squaws, before them!" said Lagona, contemptuously. Then turning to Ada, he said:

"My sister has traveled with Lagona long enough—she will stay with her own braves now, and take care of them. They are children and want a mother!"

Having so spoken, and that in a tone and with a look which admitted of no reply, the Comanche Chief waved his men onward, and soon the yelling warriors were again seen scouring over the prairie on the trail of the Rangers—their horses refreshed with water from the stream just crossed.

"For Heaven's sake, do dismount, Miss Ada, and cut us loose!" cried Malerson; "we are almost dead!"

Ada did as he desired, and soon the band were all free. But they had been so harshly bound, and confined in one position so long, that at first they could scarcely move. But the captain hurried to overhaul the few stores which were left, and to his infinite joy found a bottle of rum left, which he lessened in quantity as hastily as he could.

The party was now in a truly pitiable condition. They were far from the settlement, their horses not fit for travel, their provisions almost gone, in the region where the Indians were all hostile to the whites, and had thus far been restrained from slaying them, only by the influence of a single chief, who might be killed when the Rangers were overtaken; and all of their arms and ammunition had been taken away from them by the Rangers. Only Ada was in a situation to defend herself—she only had arms.

"What shall we do now, Miss Ada?" asked Malerson, as soon as he felt a little comforted with his bottle-consoler.

"Get back to a civilized region, where we can do better than we have done," said Ada, promptly. "Men," said she, addressing the band; "you have suffered peril and inconvenience in my service, but you shall be rewarded. You elected me your queen, and you shall not regret it. In my wish to carry out my private designs, I shall not forget your interests. As soon as our horses are rested and fed, we will make for the settlements—I have yet means to procure fresh arms and materials, and we will make a sweep into some of the rich Mexican towns on the Rio Grande, and relieve them of their superfluous wealth!"

This speech of their lately-condemned leader was received with loud cheers by the men; and their sour looks changed as suddenly as April weather, from clouds into sunshine.

CHAPTER XLVI.

The spirits of the Rangers rather rose, when they bounded away upon their fresh horses; and the gallant major hoped to get so good a start, that by traveling all night, he might be able yet to escape the immense force which was behind him. Yet, knowing the tireless nature of the Comanche horse and rider, which when forced, will neither stop for miles nor hours, he knew that he and those with him must keep unflaggingly on until they reached the settlements—that if they halted to rest, even for two or three hours, the sleepless foe would be upon them. For a little while their spirits rose; but soon they saw the long dusky line of their foes break out from the range of timber which they had recently left. And then many a glance was thrown back, from time to time, by the major, who tried to discover whether the enemy gained, or if his party yet held their own. For hours, thus they rode on, and the keen-eyed Ranger saw that, as the long-used and severely tried horses of his troop began to flag, the Indians were steadily and gradually gaining upon him. Observing a small island or patch of timber in the prairie, some miles ahead, he ordered his men to push their horses to their utmost speed, determining there to make a stand—his only chance indeed, against such a host as followed him; for under cover of the trees, each of his well armed men was good for at least a dozen Indians.

It was nearly dark—the sun was just sinking behind a black and swift-rising storm-cloud in the West, and the Indians were gaining very rapidly.

"Do you think we can reach the timber before they overtake us?" asked Mr. Delorme, looking anxiously back, and shuddering—for the wild yells of the fierce and exultant Indians, who believed that the Rangers were in their power, could be plainly heard.

"As much as ever, but I hope so," said the Ranger.

"How like fiends they yell!" said Stella, looking back, with an anxious eye.

"Let our six-shooters open on 'em once, and they'll yell to a better purpose," said the Ranger, bitterly.

The race was now fearfully exciting. One-half mile more, and the Rangers would reach cover—not a quarter of a mile in their rear came at least two thousand yelling savages.

The Rangers, as well as their leader, saw that it would be close work; and, while they urged on their almost spent horses, they began

to look to their weapons, and measure the chances for a first shot.

Three or four minutes more, and the foremost of McCullough's party were at the edge of the little clump of wood—and not three hundred yards behind rode Lagona and his best mounted warriors, their shrill war-whoops sounding like the knell of death. A moment more, and the Rangers were under cover, and, throwing themselves from their horses, began to deploy out for defence.

A yell—a single wild cry, ear-piercing in its shrillness, came, at this moment, from the ranks of the Indians—and, to the horror of Mr. Delorme and his companions, the white steed, which had so gallantly carried Stella thus far from captivity, turned and fled, with her clinging in terror to its back, to the side of its master, whose well-known cry had reached its ear. And as it reached Lagona, he steadied the form of the fainting girl in the saddle, and, uttering a wild shout of triumph, wheeled, with a band of warriors circling in an impenetrable hedge around him, and, before the Rangers could do more than fire a harmless and scattering volley, was beyond their reach.

"God of mercy help me! I will rescue her or die!" shouted Paul; and he turned his horse, and tried to spur alone toward the Indians. But the exhausted animal made a few mad, desperate plunges, and then fell to the earth.

"It is of no use—we can do nothing at present. Our horses are utterly done out!" said McCullough, sadly, as he looked at the miserable father and now half-maddened lover. "We shall have all that we can do to defend ourselves, if they dare to attack us here; if they do not, it would be madness—yes, worse than madness—to attack them on the plains, where they have such an overwhelming advantage in numbers, and in the condition of their animals."

"How is it that their horses have stood the run so much better than ours?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"Because they have spare horses, one to each man, and have changed on the route, from time to time. It is an old trick of theirs," replied McCullough.

"What can we do—what can we do? Stella must be rescued, or I shall die!" groaned Paul.

"There is but one way to do," said the Ranger chief. "We must get back to the settlements, if these devils will let us, and get more men, and then come and tan them out of existence! They need a lesson, and by the Eternal, they shall have it, or Ben McCullough will give up ranging, and turn tailor!"

"And in the meantime, what will become of Stella? Lagona, now that she is in his power again, will have no mercy upon her."

"Make your mind easy about that," said the major. "From the way in which he has acted, so far, toward her when she was in his power, you have no reason to think that he will use any other violence than to retain her a captive. Let me only get a couple of hundred volunteers together, and I'll soon make him glad to give her up."

Night was now fast drawing on—the sun was either set, or hidden entirely behind the clouds, which, swiftly rising, threatened a terrible storm.

The Indians had retreated a mile or so, and there seemed to be holding a council together. Darkness came on in a little while, and the major could not tell whether the Indians intended to attack him in the wood or not. Whatever their intentions might be, he had done the best he could, by way of preparation to meet them. His horses, tied firmly together, had been fastened in a ring to the trees. Sentinels were posted all around the little wood—which did not cover more than an acre or two of ground—and every man was on guard. No fires were lighted, no noise was made, not a sound heard, except the panting of the tired horses, and the heavy breathings of anxious men.

An hour passed—perhaps more—and, except an occasional yell, nothing could be heard of the Indians. The darkness, now growing very dense, as clouds overspread the sky, also kept their movements entirely concealed; and the Rangers could only await their actions in uncertainty and suspense.

Suddenly, a deep, heavy, rumbling sound was heard; and Mr. Delorme and Paul, who stood close by the major, supposed it to be the

rush of the host of Indians. But the old Ranger undecieved them in a moment.

"It is rain," said he. "Let every man look out for his arms and ammunition—it's going to your young Niagara."

It soon came; and it did pour "young Niagara," as the major predicted. For hours, the clouds seemed to yield their torrents, with a vehemence that was far from comfortable to either man or beast. Only by exceeding caution, could the party preserve their arms and ammunition in a state fit for use. Their garments were literally soaked through and through.

All the night long, the storm continued, without cessation; but, upon the approach of day, it broke, and the sun arose in a cloudless sky. But in vain did the party look for a trace of the red men who had appeared in such countless numbers the night before. Not one was in sight. They had passed away in the darkness, and the storm, most likely, had washed away every mark of their trail.

Fires were now lighted in the little grove, the horses turned out to feed, and the men allowed to dry their clothing, and to prepare food—for the major announced his determination to return to the settlements for reinforcements, as soon as his horses were rested enough for travel.

Both Paul and Mr. Delorme were dreadfully down-hearted. To them it now seemed that poor Stella was inevitably lost.

CHAPTER XLVII.

By noon-time, the horses had rested and fed enough to be fit again for travel. The grass, though damp at the roots, was dry above, with the effect of wind and sun; and the men, though suffering for want of sleep, were considerably refreshed with their rest and food. The major now ordered them to saddle up, and make ready for a start. While this was being done, Paul, whose eyes were continually glancing away in the direction which he supposed had been taken by the Indians, suddenly cried out that he saw men on the prairie—mounted men.

The major instantly sprung into a small tree with his spy-glass, to take an observation.

"Put out those fires—don't let a particle of smoke be seen," he cried, in a moment after his glance had reached the party which Paul had first descried.

"What are they?—Indians, or not?" asked Paul.

"White men—that rascal, Malerson, and his gang, I think," said the major. "Have all the horses led to the back of the grove, and form an ambuscade on this side, men. If it is them, we'll not go back to the settlements empty-handed. We'll take them as prisoners, and see if there isn't some law in Texas. It would be no more than justice to shoot them, like wolves, on the prairie—but justice isn't law, now-a-days, by a long odds."

The orders of the major were speedily obeyed. The fires were extinguished, the horses secreted, and the men with ready weapons, posted behind trees, prepared to act when their commander gave the word.

In a short time, the new comers could be very plainly distinguished, even by the naked eye, and they proved indeed to be the robber band. Their horses had become sufficiently rested to enable them to move along at a fair rate; and, as they expected soon to reach the settlements, their ill-humor and discontent had vanished, and they seemed as gay as if they had prospered, rather than suffered.

In a careless and jovial way, they approached the little grove, Ada riding a little apart from the rest. Malerson, full of his usual coarse jokes and careless levity, rode at the head of the main body. As they entered the edge of the wood and dismounted, it appeared, by their conversation, that they intended to rest here for two or three hours. But, before that number of minutes had elapsed, at a shrill whistle from their leader, the Rangers stepped out from their ambush, and the entire gang found themselves surrounded.

Resistance was outside the pale of chance, even, and not to be thought of. They were unarmed—their opponents fully armed.

"Surrender, men!" said Ada, quietly, as McCullough bade them do so. "We will have an escort to the settlements, now—that is all. Don't be alarmed for the future."

"You speak as if you were in command, my

little bantam," said McCullough, not at first recognizing the sex of the speaker—for he had never seen Ada before.

"I was until this moment, when you assumed it," she said, coolly. Then observing Paul and Mr. Delorme near, both looking wretched and downcast, and no sign of Stella there, she at once suspected that Lagona had, in some manner, recovered the latter, and a smile of satisfied triumph came out upon her handsome face, as she added:

"Gentlemen, I congratulate you upon the success of your expedition. You've had a hard ride in search of disappointment. I am happy that you have found it!"

"Torturing fiend!" muttered Paul.

"Once your dear Ada—once your life, your love, your angel!" said the tantalizing girl.

"Perdition! Is there no way to stop her mouth?"

"Once you used to stop it with kisses, Paul. You were very fond of kissing in those days."

"Bring up our horses, men—some of you—the rest use your lassoes, and fasten those gentlemen upon their horses so that they cannot fall off!" cried the major.

"You need not take any precautions in regard to me, sir. I pledge you the word and honor of a lady, that I will not try to escape, at least, not until we are in the settlements; and should I change my mind there, you shall have fair warning," said Ada.

"A woman? And that is Miss Ada McAlpin!" said the major, in surprise.

"Yes, sir. You have undoubtedly heard of me through Paul. He used to be very fond of me—was so, until he found it would pay to love an heiress," said Ada, glancing at Mr. Delorme, to see what effect her words would have on him.

"You shall not be bound like the rest; but a special guard will be placed over you," said the major. "And," he added, "you will do me a favor by not annoying Mr. Paul Malerson with any remarks—he is suffering enough now."

"Poor fellow, how I pity him!" said Ada, mockingly. "But, major, as a favor to you, I will curb my feelings and bridle my tongue; for once I will be a silent woman."

"If you can," muttered the major, with a half-repressed smile, turning away to superintend the arrangement of the other prisoners. He could not but admire the coolness and spirit of the girl.

"You needn't tie me. I will give you my word of honor I won't offer to run," said Malerson, as one of the Rangers approached to bind him, as others were doing to the rest.

"You'd better give something that you have or once had," said the Major. "Put double lashings on the wretch. He is the worst devil of the gang."

"Thank you for the compliment. Can't you let me have a little rum to drink your health in?" said Malerson, coolly.

"If I had, and I thought it would choke you, you should have it with pleasure," said the major.

"Thank you again. When I get the chance to choke you, rest assured that the will won't be wanting," replied Malerson bitterly.

"The hangman will do your choking," said Mr. Delorme, with a look of scorn and hate.

"Ah, you there, old gentleman? You and Paul both against me? It is hard when one's relations won't stand up for him, nor even give him a drink of rum to raise his spirits. But never mind, old fellow, when we get to the plantation the tables will be turned. I reckon your old lady will teach you better than to treat me in this way. If she don't, then spell my name backward and water my grog!"

All being ready for a start now, the order was given; and the Rangers, with their captives in line, and under strict guard, headed once more to the east.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

When the horse upon which Stella rode turned at the cry of Lagona, she was taken so completely by surprise, and so overcome by terror, that she was actually among the Indians before she fully realized her position or peril. Had thought kept its mastery, she would have cast herself from the horse before it had passed from the cover of the Rangers' rifles, but thought only came to her when it was too late.

There was no look of triumph, nor even one of anger, upon the face of Lagona, when he checked her horse and drew it up by the

side of his own, and supported her, half-fainting as she was; nor even an accent of displeasure, or a word lacking kindness when he spoke to her.

"The Great Spirit has sent the White Flower back to Lagona!" he said, with a proud, but mournful dignity.

She made no reply. Her heart was too full of wild, hopeless grief now for utterance. This last peril, so unlooked for, and so sudden, took all of her courage away.

The chief, as we said before, sent back a shout of triumph and defiance to the Rangers, and then retired a mile or so from the position of the party; and there, while Stella was left under a guard of his chosen and favorite braves, he held a council with his sub-chiefs, to decide whether or not they should attack the Rangers, or retire satisfied with the recovery of the prize which their leader valued so highly, and for which he had dared, and suffered so much.

The argument for attack was, that the palaces, and the Rangers especially, were their deadly enemies; and their scalps, and also their arms, ammunition, and horses, would be a valuable and desirable acquisition. The argument against it was, the position which the Rangers had gained, the deadliness of their terrible six-shooters, and besides, the almost certainty, that if the victory was with the Indians, it would be bought with an immense cost of life. To surprise the Rangers would now be impossible; they knew that no terror could drive them to surrender—they could only be conquered in death.

Some of the most ardent young warriors and braves were for immediate attack, without waiting to count the cost; but Lagona, and the chiefs who had the most experience, advised a contrary course. The prize which they sought had been given to them, as they argued, by the Great Spirit, without the loss of a drop of blood, and to lose many good warriors for the sake of a few scalps, would be foolish.

And opportunely to aid those who argued for no attack, the storm came up, rendering it almost impossible, and dampening the eagerness of the over-zealous. It was decided to take the back track, and soon, in close column, to avoid getting separated, the whole body wheeled and rode back toward their mountain homes.

Wrapped in great blankets, and supported once more in the powerful arms of Lagona, Stella was borne away with them, almost insensible in her utter wretchedness. Poor girl! it seemed as if death only could be the ending of her many perils and trials.

CHAPTER XLIX.

Vastly different did McCullough's Rangers look upon their return to La Bolsa de Flores, from the appearance they exhibited when, full of hope and eagerness, they had dashed away from the same place a few days before, on the trail of the vile abductors of Stella Delorme. They had ridden over many leagues of ground with scarcely any rest, hardly taking time to eat food enough to sustain their strength. Their horses, like themselves, were nearly worn out, and they were glad once more to get where their old favorites, refreshed with long rest, were again ready for the saddle.

The return to the plantation was pleasant to them, but poor Mr. Delorme and Paul, coming back as they did, without Stella, were more wretched, even more miserable, than they had been when they went away. Everything they saw only reminded them of her, and their sad fancies painted her fate in the darkest colors.

Mrs. Delorme—sad-faced, nervous and wretched as themselves—awaited their coming, and looked anxiously for Stella, as the long and weary train filed in through the gate, and halted before the house. But if her cheek was pale at first, it reddened sufficiently, when her eye fell upon Malerson, who bound with the rest, came up under guard. His eye met hers, and with a quick glance at his bonds, he made a sign, as if drawing a knife over them, and gave her a look at once imploring and threatening, which she understood but too well.

"Where shall I stow these villains, until my men are sufficiently rested to send them to prison for trial?" asked the major of Mr. Delorme.

"I will have a store-house cleared out for their use!" said the planter.

"If there's grab and rum there, you needn't mind clearing it out—we had rather occupy it

as it is!" said Malerson, with an impudent air.

"All that you'll get from me, will be bread and water, until you are removed to a stronger prison!" said Mr. Delorme, bitterly.

"I don't believe the mistress will be so hard-hearted!" muttered Malerson, in an undertone. "If she is, I'm mistaken, and she'll make a greater mistake than she has for a long time!"

The prisoners, with the exception of Ada, were now removed to a building which Mr. Delorme assigned for their use, where a guard was still kept over them.

"You may as well confine me, sir," said Ada, to the major, "I withdraw my parole, and will no longer promise not to attempt to escape!"

"I am under the opinion that you can withdraw yourself, Miss Ada," said the Major, with a smile. "I'm not used to warring with women, or making captives of them; and with the concurrence of Master Paul and Mr. Delorme, have made up my mind that your further company can be dispensed with. And let me advise you not to again associate with such a set of rascally cut-throats as those who were just marched off with the guard. A greater villain never danced upon nothing, under the hangman's tree!"

"They were not my associates, but my tools, sir!" said Ada, haughtily. "My tools, with which I sought to revenge myself upon Paul Malerson, for his perfidy to me. I have succeeded, and am contented so far!"

"Well, young lady, I have nothing to do with your quarrels, and only offered my advice, because you have points of character which I admire! You are brave, persevering, and in spite of your apparel and this adventure, modest. You would have made a brave man a good wife, once!"

The haughty look passed away, and the tone of Ada, when she replied, was humble and tremulous. She felt that the major was sincere in what he said, and his words touched the core of her better nature.

"I believe—I know I should!" she said. "O sir," and she lowered her voice as she spoke, "had you known how I loved Paul Malerson; how, listening to his vows, I knew no sky in which he was not the star, no world of which he was not the god, you would not wonder that his desertion made me forget my sex, my place, made me utterly desperate and careless of all things but revenge. I love him yet. If I did not, he would not be living; from his person, I would have sought a wronged woman's revenge. But love, once awakened, can never utterly die, the remembrance of past joys cannot be crushed out of the heart—the track of 'winning ways' cannot be effaced!"

There were tears in Ada's eyes when she ceased speaking.

"I pity you, from my soul I do!" said the noble-hearted major.

He was too brave to be insensible to the sorrows of a courageous man's most invincible and surest conqueror, a pretty woman. There was never yet a hero who was insensible to her power. Nelson could not be conquered by his country's foes, even in death he was a victor, but the fair Hamilton caused him to stoop even in the blaze of his glory. Go back to the far-away days of chivalry, when a Saladin and a Richard Cœur de Léon fought; and from then, until now, show me one great knight, one mighty commander, one gallant gentleman in arms, who did not bow his head to the sceptre of Beauty.

"You had better go in and take some refreshment, and then consider yourself free!" said the major to Ada, who now stood alone with him, for Mr. Delorme and Paul had entered the house.

"Sir, I thank you—but I can accept no favors under that roof. And bad as they are, I do not think that it is right for me to desert the men who for me have got themselves into trouble. I know what your duty is too well to ask you to release them, and I so feel for them, that I am willing to share their fate!"

The major paused a moment, thoughtfully, and then asked: "Have you influence enough to take them out of the State, were I to release them?"

"I have!" said Ada. "When you captured us, it was my intention to have procured arms, and then to have led them over the borders into Mexico, where I would have lived upon those who stained this soil with the noblest blood that ever flowed from human veins, that of Fanning, Bowie, Crockett, and others!

I can no longer be a woman—all womanly feeling has been crushed out of my heart!"

"Will you go to Mexico, if I give your men their freedom and their arms?" asked McCullough.

"I will!" said Ada.

"It shall be done—I will see Mr. Delorme about it, and it shall be done!" said the major. "The idea suits me!"

CHAPTER L

"What, release those who have caused the abduction of my daughter—let them go free who aided in tearing her from my arms? Never, sir, never! Sooner would I hang them without trial before my own door!" cried Mr. Delorme, passionately, when McCullough proposed the discharge of the prisoners.

"You will think better of this when you get over your passion!" said the major, quietly. "There is reason in everything. You wish to get your daughter back, do you not?"

"To be sure I do—I will if I have to petition Congress for an army to do it!" said the planter, whose patience and temper had been completely exhausted in his physical and mental suffering.

"Your petition, like hundreds more for help from those who suffer upon our borders, would be laid aside by Congress, while some party broil is occupying the assembled wisdom of the nation. Now, let me show you the advantage of discharging these people!"

"Well, sir, I'll listen, but you'll never convince me!"

"I'll bet a gallon of old rye that I do!"

"Very well, sir, as I said, I will listen. That much is due in courtesy—I owe you far more in gratitude!"

"Don't speak of that—only see with me whether it will pay or not to have further bother with these men. In the first place, they have many chances in their favor—the chances of escape from prison, and the glorious 'uncertainties of the law'—which is the principal thing that feeds so many lawyers. They'd starve if law was justice, and a plain path for honest men to travel in!"

"That is so!" said the planter.

"Next," continued the major, "my men are almost worn out. I want to relieve them from guard-duty, and to let them rest while I go out and call in more volunteers, for I am as determined as you can be, to rescue your daughter from the Comanches. It never yet was said of Ben McCullough that he turned back from an undertaking, nor shall that charge be ever made!"

"Heaven bless you, major! Heaven bless you!" cried the planter, grasping the true soldier's hand. "I have not another word to say—do as you think best in everything!"

"I will do nothing that can result to your injury!" said the major. "I will order some refreshments sent to the prisoners, and then I'll have them mustered, and make them a bit of a speech. I'm no orator, but I've a way of conveying my ideas which most men can understand without they are terribly dull!"

The major now, with the full consent of Mr. Delorme, sent a liberal supply of food, and a moderate quantity of liquor to the gang in the store-house, and informing Ada of what he intended to do, prevailed upon her to take some refreshment, in a room by herself.

After the men had been allowed sufficient time to refresh themselves, the Major ordered them to be mustered in front of the house. Neither Mr. Delorme nor Paul were present, but the major, with Ada by his side, stood upon the piazza.

They had been untied; and being of that nature which is easily satisfied, when hunger and thirst is appeased, looked very orderly, as they stood there ready to hear the major's speech.

"Men," said he—"I call you men, though a more rascally set of cursers don't cross a man's track oftener than a comet—men, this lady here has been pleading with me for your release. I have consented, upon one condition, and for you she has accepted it. It is that you are to leave the State; and if you must steal, why steal from the Mexicans, not from us, who have little but lead and steel to give you! What do you say—do you endorse her promise?"

"We do!" they shouted, as with a single voice.

"Very well—the guard will escort you to a camping-place, a mile or two outside of this

plantation, where you will stay until I prepare some provisions for you, and restore your arms. And mark you, if one of you ever dares to return here, or even within the borders of Texas raises a hand against any man, woman or child, to rob or abuse in any shape or manner, you shall hang, or I'll eat frogs and turn tailor! Now you've heard me—I'm not much on a talk, but I mean every word I say—and I never break a promise to friend or foe. I now give you in charge of this lady, and hope the devil will all get you, in due time!"

The major's speech was received with deafening cheers, and as their horses were brought, the rascally gang mounted, and still under escort, went out to the place where they were to wait for their arms.

CHAPTER LI

Laguna did not go back to the same place in the Sierra Charrate to which McCullough had first tracked him, but sending directions by a sub-chief for the entire village to move, he laid his course away to the south-west, toward the Rio Grande, striking for the "Wild Rose Pass" of the Sierras Diabolas—or Devil's Hills, as they are not misapplied named. All of that stormy night, and during all of the next day, without halting a moment, he and his tireless warriors kept on. But they halted on the second night by a water-course, and rested until the next day, giving their horses a chance to recruit. Laguna, who, as he had ever done before, still treated Stella with the most chivalric respect, had a small tent, made from blankets, raised especially for her, and he brought her the most delicate food to tempt her to eat. Berries and fruits, and birds, as well as buffalo meat and dried venison, were laid before her; but in vain—she wept and sobbed, but would not eat. This troubled the young chief greatly. He really and truly loved the poor girl—loved her as well as his wild, but noble nature would permit—and her grief went to his heart. Had he not in his very soul believed that her destiny had been linked to his own, by the will of the Great Spirit, he would not have detained her, but would have taken her back in safety to those who mourned her absence.

Ah! how unlike some civilized tyrants did he act, while she was utterly in his power—seeking not to force her love, but to win it by kindness and by tenderness. In more than one savage breast—or rather, in the breast of more than one savage, I would say—have I found honor which would have done credit to the noblest pale-face in the land.

On the next day, Laguna and his party started early, and rode fast. Before night they entered the wild, but lonely pass, which I spoke of in the opening of this chapter, named like the chain of stern and rugged mountains, not inaptly, for it was carpeted and lined with flowers, while, on either hand, the great black and grey cliffs, towering up into the very clouds, looked as they were named—"devilish!"

The sun was some three hours high when they came to an opening to the east, which led into a valley, far more beautiful and all as fruitful, as that which we described in the Sierras Charrate, though not so difficult of access nor so well guarded as the other, by the hand of the greatest military engineer that exists—Dame Nature. Down through this valley rushed, not one roaring, dashing stream, as in the other, but many gurgling musical rivulets, winding and twisting in silvery brightness through the low-land, or leaping from above in noisy and beautiful cascades.

Had poor Stella been in a mood of situation to admire anything, she could not have felt other than a pleased wonder at the skill in house-building which the red men now exhibited. Scarce two hours had passed since Laguna seated her upon a small, mossy knoll beneath an orange tree, before he bade her rise, and led her to a house in shape precisely like the mansion at La Bolsa de Flores, yet on a much smaller scale. Its walls were made of small poles and twisted vines, interspersed with flowers and sweet-scented bushes and shrubs. It was carpeted with orange and lemon leaves and flowers, which with every pressure of the foot, sent forth their perfumed breath. The roof was tightly thatched with the broad, green leaves of the palmetto. Moss and flower-covered seats and lounges were seen within, and in an inner alcove a couch spread with soft, bright furs met the eye.

"This is the home of the White Flower," said Lagona gently, as he led her to a seat.

Pale and utterly despairing; hopeless and almost broken-hearted, she sank down, but made no reply.

He now brought her food—small fishes, fresh from the mountain streams, and broiled upon coals—fresh meat of the antelope, delicate and tender—venison, bread and fruit. But her downcast eyes were not raised to the food or him—she would touch nothing, look at nothing, do nothing, but weep silently and sigh piteously.

The stern warrior himself looked a picture of wretchedness when he saw this, for he began to fear that death would rescue her from his hands whom he was determined that no mortal force could take.

And he went out from the beautiful building, which had been built expressly for her, and for a long time paced thoughtfully to and fro between it and a rushing little brook, all full of noisy music, which ran within a few yards.

His warriors were busy in pitching their camp, and preparing for the coming of their wives and little ones; but Lagona paid no heed to their movements—his sun would not shine upon him—his heart was in a cloud.

CHAPTER LII.

The "Free Rangers" were encamped in a small grove, about a half-hour's ride from La Bolsa de Flores. Ada McAlpin having received permission for them to remain there in quiet, upon condition that none of them left the camp, while she went to Galveston to arrange some business there.

To make them more obedient to this condition, the major had withheld their arms and munitions, although they were plentifully supplied with provisions, and moderately with an article, which such as they cannot, or rather will not, do without—whisky. Put some men into a storehouse full of provisions, deny them liquor, and they'll starve to death.

Captain Jack, by management, could get enough of the ardent to keep up his spirits for there were some in the band who did not care for their allowance, and shared with him.

Meantime, all was excitement at the plantation, for Major McCullough had sent messengers in every direction to gather volunteers for a grand exterminating foray into the Comanche and Lipan country; he being determined not only to rescue Stella, but to teach the red marauders a lesson which would last them for all time, and make them more desirous to remain at home.

And from every quarter in they came, some singly, others in parties of six, eight, or a dozen hardy men armed, with the unerring rifle, the dreaded six-shooter, and the heavy bowie knife—men who were each superior to a dozen of Uncle Sam's grog-shop recruits—which last are mostly serfs of foreign birth, just fit for serfs beneath our flag, and poorly calculated to uphold its honor, either in times of war or peace; but ready, as too many of them were in the Mexican war, to desert it, and fill a legion to fight against it.

Men there were, among those who had hastened out in answer to the gallant major's call, who had the fire of revenge burning deep in their breasts—men who had lost wives, children, and other relatives, by the lance, arrow, or knife of the red man, and who now hoped to have a chance to take life for life—a poor satisfaction, yet one very natural.

As fast as these men came in, the major put them under drill, so far as he could, and also sent his officers out after a sufficient quantity of provisions, and pack-mules to carry them for his party; for he intended to go far, and not to return until his object had been entirely accomplished.

Both Paul and Mr. Delorme were fully occupied as hosts, and the planter cared not for the cost, he only counted upon, and hoped for, the restoration of his child.

It took a considerable time to get so many men together, and provision them, and it was on the evening of the tenth day before the major had gathered a sufficient force, in his mind, to invade the country of the enemy. At that time he had about three hundred and fifty men, and to a European general, such a force would seem very inadequate to attack a nation which could assemble ten or fifteen thousand mounted warriors at a very brief notice; but with that class of men, who think

twenty to one not an overmatch against them—as they have often proved in Mexico, Texas, Cuba, Nicaragua, and on the "Plains"—three or four hundred men compose an army enough for almost any purpose.

On the evening of the tenth day after his return, the major mustered his men, all mounted and under arms, to see if they were fully prepared for service; for he intended to start on the next day.

They made a unique but powerful show, clad in every style of dress, armed variously, and mounted upon horses of all sizes and colors. But no matter what their garb was: you had but to look at their sinewy frames, rough faces, and fearless eyes, to know that they were ready and fit for the work before them.

The inspection of the major was close: every weapon, man, and horse was examined; and if the least thing was wrong, the delinquent was cautioned to rectify it. For those who were ready for the field, the old soldier had a kind and hearty word, which trebly endeared the old "war-horse"—as they called him—to them.

The inspection over, they were dismissed, with orders to be ready for the saddle when the sun rose in the morning, and with permission to enjoy themselves as best they might upon their last night—as, indeed, it might be, for many of them—in the settlements.

"Is everything ready now for a start?" asked Mr. Delorme, as the major stood upon the piazza, while the men filed off to their respective quarters.

"All ready, sir. To-morrow will see us in the field once more; and I never will eat bread under a roof again until I've got your child back, and tanned out the redskins so completely that they'll remember Ben McCullough forever, and scare their papooses with his name a hundred years from now!"

"There is that girl, riding this way," said Paul, turning pale, and going into the house.

It was indeed Ada McAlpin who was seen riding through at the gate, dressed in her masculine garb, as described before, well-armed, and magnificently mounted.

"I come, sir," said she to the major, "to report that, having concluded my business at Galveston, I have returned, and am now ready to lead my band away, according to the conditions of their release."

"It is well. They shall have their arms in the morning," said the major.

Ada bowed, gave him the military salute, and rode away to the camp of her Free Rangers.

CHAPTER LIII.

Days went; and poor Stella, scarce touching food, and mourning all the time, faded away, and wilted like a crushed flower. In vain did Lagona send the beautiful maidens of his tribe, who had come to the new location, to wait upon her, and to sing and dance for her. They could not dry her tears; they could not hush her sighs; they could not bring smiles to her pale and sorrow-stricken face. It was evident that the Master of Life would soon take her to his bosom, unless some change came to render her less miserable.

Lagona saw and felt this; and it rendered him more miserable than she was. He bore it for a time; but when he saw no change in her—that she looked upon him still with aversion—his noble nature took supremacy, and he determined to restore her to her relatives.

One evening, before the darkness had come on, while the still gray of twilight lay dreamily on hill and lowland—on rock, and tree, and water—he entered the pretty room assigned to her, and said, very low and gently:

"The White Flower must weep no more! Lagona will take her back to those who love her, and he will die; for he cannot live without the White Flower!"

Stella looked up in wonder, but did not reply: for she had become so hopeless, that she did not realize that he meant, indeed, to give her freedom.

"Does the White Flower hear the words of Lagona?" he asked. "He will take her back to her father's lodge, that she may smile again, and make glad the hearts that love her!"

"Lagona does not mean what he says," she murmured: "He mocks me in my misery!"

"Lagona never eats his words! He loves

the White Flower! She does not love him here; but in the land of spirits she will love him, for he will die for her! To-morrow, she shall start for the lodge of her father. To-night, Lagona begs her to eat and drink, so that may be strong for the journey."

Lagona said this in a low, firm tone, and looked so noble, though so very sad, when he uttered it, that Stella felt sure he was not deceiving her. Tears rolled down her cheeks again; but now they were tears of joy.

"Noble, good, generous Lagona!" she cried, grasping his hand, and kissing it many times: "I will never—never forget you! I cannot love you; but I will respect you always—will ever call you friend—a great, good, honorable man!"

The hand which she held and kissed, trembled like an aspen leaf, and his whole frame shook with an agitation which showed how great was the conflict in his bosom—with what a struggle he conquered his desires and passions.

At last he said, in a low and husky tone:

"Let the White Flower eat and grow strong, so that she can ride a great ways to-morrow."

"Cannot I go to-night, Lagona?" she asked.

"It will be very dark; and the White Flower must have food and rest, to make her strong!" replied the chief.

"Lagona may dream, and alter his mind," said Stella, sadly.

"No sleep will come to Lagona's eyes; therefore, he cannot dream. The White Flower shall turn her face toward her father's lodge, and commence her journey when the great orb of day begins his walk across the sky!"

The chief said no more, but turned away and went out. Soon after, graceful Indian maidens entered, bearing food of almost every kind—meats, birds, fishes, and fruits. These they placed before Stella, as also wine, which he had procured in some way, and now offered, to give her strength.

"Noble, generous, brave Lagona! Were he not a savage, and had I a heart to control, it would be his," sighed Stella, as she saw how nobly and disinterestedly he was acting, while he was lacerating his own heart, and aiding to destroy his own happiness.

She could not but draw a contrast between his nature and that of many a pale-faced lord and tyrant of whom she had read; and the glory of the contrast was all on the red man's side.

CHAPTER LIV.

The return of Ada McAlpin to the camp of the Free Rangers, and the announcement that upon the morrow they would break up camp and turn their heads toward the Rio Grande, caused immense joy among those graceless scamps. After she had made the announcement and retired to her own tent, which was pitched at some distance from the rest—as usual, retiring amid their wild cheers and hurrahs—it was determined by them to have a grand jubilee. Captain Jack had by some means become the master of a quantity of liquor, and as they had an abundant supply of food, a supper and debauch was to be the event of their last night in the Lone Star State.

In this they were not likely to be disturbed by Ada; for she, fatigued with a weary and rapid ride of many leagues, cast herself down to slumber, leaving orders that she should be awakened at dawn.

Such men as those who composed Malerson's gang are generally coarse and sensual in their entire organization—their animal appetites are all they have to gratify: mental pleasures are to them unknown. A gluttonous supper, in this case, was followed by drinking, in the course of which many a wild story of rapine and crime was told, and received with rapturous applause, and many a licentious song sung, too obscene to ever darken a page which emanates from my pen.

The night wore on; and with each hour the revelry grew higher—madder. But those who were the weakest aloft began to feel the fumes of the liquor in their upper stories, and to topple down into sottish slumber where they drank. Others rose, and staggered away to their quarters, where they also sunk down into the helplessness of inebriation. It was not after midnight, if so late, when Captain Jack Malerson, who prided himself on his spirit-holding capacity, found himself alone at the rude table.

"Well," said he, in soliloquy, "here I am.

alone in my glory. It is astonishing how quiet some fellows keep up when they're drinking. A quart lays 'em out as stiff as logs, but a gallon don't knock my underpinning away: it only makes me a little more devilish than usual—that's all! I feel just like doing something bold and Satanic yet to-night. I believe I'll go and visit Hattie, and borrow a thousand or so of the old girl."

With the captain, a bad idea was not allowed to rest long before it was put into execution. Taking another drink or two, and filling his pocket-flask for further use, he wrapped himself in a *serape*, and moved away in the darkness and gloom toward the plantation—going on foot, so as to make less noise than he would on horseback.

CHAPTER LV.

It was after midnight—wearing along in the hours of morning—and yet Mrs. Delorme had not retired to rest. She had become almost a shadow of her former self—nervous, fretful, wretched, and unhappy. Strange fancies, that the love of her husband had changed to hate fears, that her passion for Lagona had been discovered, and a continual dread that Malerson would continue to annoy her, and eventually reveal the secret which he held in terror over her head—all these things combined to render existence to her a burden rather than a pleasure.

The custom very prevalent in the South—and ever such in France—of having a chamber separate from that of her husband—an idea which should have occurred to the unfortunate Mr. Caudle—alone prevented Mr. Delorme from learning the state of feeling to which his unfortunate wife had become reduced. He, however, paid but little attention to her altered appearance; or, if he did, he probably attributed it to the cause which made him so miserable—the loss of his almost-worshiped daughter.

To and fro—fretting and moaning—paced the unhappy woman at the hour which we have named. Suddenly, a noise was heard upon the piazza outside of the chamber window, and the next instant the form of a man, who had ascended from below by some grapevines which were trained over the lattice-work, met her eye. She was on the point of screaming, and giving an alarm, when he stepped boldly through an open window into the room, and she recognized John Malerson, her greatest dread and terror.

Sinking, pale, and almost fainting, into a chair, she hoarsely whispered:

"For Heaven's sake, man, why do you come here?—why do you torment me?"

And she trembled yet the more when she saw, by his flushed face, reddened eye, and staggering gait, that he was intoxicated.

"Don't make a fuss, or get scared, 'Hat, old girl—I've come to see you a bit!" said he in the thick, husky tone which always indicates intoxication. "You see I'm a goin' off in the mornin', and I wanted to say good-bye to ye, just for old-time's sake. Lordee, how you did love me once! Come, give me a kiss on the strength o' that! Come, old girl—go hangin' back!"

And he staggered toward her.

"Stand back, John Malerson—stand back, or your life is not worth a straw! I will scream, and bring those here who will not wait to ask why you came, before they punish your audacity!"

The attitude of the lady, as she sprung to her feet, and the low, determined tone in which she spoke, for a moment abashed the ruffian, and he paused.

"Sit ye down, old girl!" said he, after a moment's hesitation—"Sit ye down, and have a talk with your old Jack. He won't trouble you if you'll be quiet!"

And he took a seat, and seemed more sober than when he entered the room. Mrs. Delorme also sat down; for she was too weak to remain upon her feet.

"Say what you have to say quickly, and be gone!" she whispered again.

"I am so dry, I must wet my whistle before I try to talk!" said the ruffian, taking his flask from his pocket, and applying it to his lips. After taking so hearty a draught, he offered the flask to her, saying: "Hain't you better take a swig, Hat, just to steady your nerves? You look pale; I reckon the old gent don't feed you overly and above common well!"

"Yea; give me the liquor!" she said, hoarsely, as she clutched the flask. "I need strength;

for there is a rough, wild path before me, and I know that I must tread it!"

She drained the flask to the very bottom, while he looked on in stupid wonder.

"That'll make you as drunk as the boys I just left!" said he, as she cast the empty flask upon the floor.

"It will give me strength to defy you, you heartless villain!—to tell you that I will no longer be the slave of terror—no longer fear to call my soul my own. I bend to you no longer! Dog, do your worst! You are not my master, now!" she cried, while the color flew to her cheeks; her form seemed to swell with strength and passion, and her eyes flashed furiously.

Jack Malerson was a bold, bad man, sober or drunk; but the very desperation of Mrs. Delorme intimidated him, and he fairly shrunk from her angry gaze.

"Leave me, coward!—leave me before I call help, and give you into the hangman's hands!" she cried, in a reckless, fearless tone.

"Hattie, Hattie, don't get excited!" he stammered. "Don't—that's a good girl, now!"

"Go! Do you hear me? Go!" she cried.

"Don't make so much noise, or they will hear ye!" said the villain, growing sober with fear.

"They shall hear me if you don't leave soon!"

"But Hattie, if I breathe one word—tell who and what you are, it will be your ruin!"

"Well, let ruin come! Better that at once, than a long life of misery and suspense! I defy you! do your worst! Help—here, HELP!"

Her last words were uttered in her loudest and shrillest scream.

"Woman, you will ruin me and yourself!" said Malerson, furiously. "Hush, you fool—hush!"

And he seized her by the throat, and tried to choke her into silence.

At first, she threw him back from her, and uttered another wild and piercing scream; but he, thoroughly maddened, seized her by the throat with both hands, and crushed her down to the floor with all his might. In vain she gasped for breath; her eyes seemed to be starting from her head, her tongue lolled out from her mouth; her face grew black—a moment more, and there would have been no life left for her. But a crash was heard—the door flew open, and a dozen men, with lights in their hands, and arms, also, rushed in. The first was McCullough, with a rifle in his hands.

One glance told him what Malerson was doing, and before the villain could do more than release his intended victim, and turn toward the window to make his escape, the butt of the Ranger's rifle crashed down upon his head, and he fell, like a bullock stricken down by the butcher's hand.

"Is the wretch dead, or will he live to grace the halter?" asked Mr. Delorme, who recognized the fallen man.

"I don't think I've quite killed him; but you had better look to your wife, sir!" said the major. "The rascally robber hasn't left life in her, I fear!"

Mrs. Delorme was not quite gone, but she was senseless when the terrified women-servants took her up and carried her to bed, while the plantation surgeon was speedily sent for.

Meantime, old Malerson was dragged away with less care than a dog would have received, and pitched into a guard-room, where a sentinel was put over him, in case he should recover so far as to try to escape.

After this was done, a thorough search was made all over the premises, to see if there were not more of the gang about; for it did not seem possible that he would have had the hardihood to venture alone upon such an enterprise, especially when there was such a large force on and about the place, and so much danger of detection.

But no sign of any other person connected with his gang could be seen.

"I do not believe that Ada McAlpin was cognizant of the fool's intended visit here!" said the major, as he prepared to retire to rest again; "but I will find out before she receives her arms and permission to go!"

"What shall we do with the wretch, Malerson?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"I hardly know—he ought to hang; but if he is Paul's father, bad as he is, that would hardly do!"

"Paul does not believe he is, nor do I! Yet, my wife says he is, and has acknowledged him

to be her brother! If she is sufficiently recovered in the morning, she must fully explain all. If he is not her brother, and not Paul's father, then, as sure as there is a God, he shall hang! If I never see my poor Stella again, it would be some satisfaction to see those suffer who were concerned in her abduction!"

"You will see her again!" said the major, confidently. "I feel it in my heart—have felt it all the time—that we would get her back for you, safe and sound!"

"Heaven grant it! Let me press her once more to my breast, and I can die contented!" said the planter.

"You'll soon see her; and then you'll not think of dying, by a long shot!" said the major, pleasantly. "But good-night; I must get a few winks of sleep to-night, for Heaven only knows when I'll have another chance. I can't sleep more than a weasel when I'm off on a scout!"

The major retired; and once more all was still in the house.

CHAPTER LVI.

"So, Miss Ada, your compact not to annoy any one in this State, and not to permit any of your band to do it, has been very suddenly and easily broken?" said the major, as he rode up to her tent on the morning which followed the event narrated in the last chapter.

"I do not understand you, sir!" she said. "When I returned last night, you had no complaint to make of my men—they were all here when I reached the camp; and as I at once retired when I entered my tent, worn out with fatigue, I have heard nothing, known nothing whatever against them!"

"Where is Jack Malerson?" asked the major.

"In the camp, I presume—he was there when I returned. Call him," said she, to one of her men.

"You'll have to call loud and long in this camp, and then without avail," said the major. "He lies at La Bolsa de Flores with a broken head, without much chance of recovery. He broke into the house last night, probably intent on robbery, and nearly murdered Mrs. Delorme while she was sounding the alarm!"

"He is almost dead, you say?" asked Ada.

"Yes; he was still senseless when I came away."

"I wish he was quite dead! He has not a particle of honor in his breast," said Ada. "I hope, sir," she added, to the major, "that you will do me the justice to believe that I did not have anything to do with this matter—that I did not dream of his intended action—for if I had, it should have been prevented."

"I believe you!" said the major. "You may as well ride back with me, and see what is determined in regard to his fate; and after that, I will furnish your men with their arms, and see them started toward the Mexican borders!"

"One word to my men, if you please, major, and I will be ready to go with you!"

The major nodded assent, and Ada ordered the men to be assembled. The graceless crew soon got together, the most of them wearing the sickish sheep-stealing look of men who had been drunk over night.

"Men!" said Ada to them; "we would now be ready to leave this camp and go upon our business, if it had not been for the actions of your former leader, John Malerson. He has broken our compact with this gentleman, and the consequence is, that he has been dangerously wounded while committing midnight depredations, and certainly forfeited, perhaps lost, his life. Let his fate be a lesson to you, and teach you that even among thieves some honor should be found! I go to see him, and I command you not to stir from the camp until I return. Disobey me, and I leave you to your fate—obey me, and I will lead you to victory and to wealth!"

The reply of the men came in a faint cheer—the debauch of the previous night had unfitted them for a strong one.

Ada now armed herself as usual, and mounting her horse, signified her readiness to accompany the major to the plantation.

For a little while, the major rode on in silence by her side; and then suddenly exclaimed, as if he had been thinking of something very important in his mind: "What a pity! what a pity!"

"Who do you so pity—of what are you thinking?" asked Ada.

"Of you, Ada; so brave, so honorable, so beautiful! You are not fit to be associated with such a set of unmitigated scoundrels!"

"I say again, as I told you once before—I command them, but do not associate with them. I scorn them as much as you do, and I only remain with them now, because I should die without excitement, and because I know I can restrain their excesses. I shall maintain a strict discipline over them, if I have to shoot one down in his tracks now and then. If any of them dare to attempt the least familiarity in look, word or deed, their punishment shall be swift and sure, and such as will deter others from following their example!"

"You are a brave girl—almost fit to lead my Rangers!"

"I would I were; for it is their happiness and pride to protect the helpless, and to punish the cruel and lawless. But I am lost—lost lost!"

"No; do not say that. It is never too late to turn over a new leaf. Leave this band, resume the dress of your sex, go where you are not known, and—"

The major hesitated, and then came to a full stop.

"And what?" asked Ada, fixing her large, beautiful eyes full upon him.

"You should never want a dollar for your support while I lived!" said the major; then fearing that she might misunderstand him, he hastily added: "Though I might never see you, I would act as a brother should toward a once erring, but repentant sister!"

"Heaven bless you!" said Ada, in a voice which struggled through a thicket of suppressed sobs. "Heaven bless you, but it cannot be! My doom is told, my fate is written, and my path is a dark one and ends in blood!"

The plantation gate was near, and they now rode on in silence.

CHAPTER LVII.

The major and Ada soon arrived at the mansion. Mr. Delorme, who appeared dreadfully agitated, was walking wildly to and fro, upon the piazza.

"What is the matter, dear sir; any bad news from your daughter?" asked the major, as he approached the planter.

"Not from her—not from her!" said the agitated man, while his face, deadly pale, and his frame quivering as with an ague, told of some terrible struggle going on within his breast.

"Is that scoundrel Malerson, dead?" asked the major, utterly at a loss to know what it was which added new trouble to the heavy load already borne by Mr. Delorme.

"I wish to God he was—I wish you had killed him at a blow, before he could have been the mouth-piece of my shame—the herald of my degradation!" groaned the planter.

I do not understand you—what does this mean, this wild agitation, this new agony which so unmales you?"

"It means—O Heaven! true friend as you are, and have proved yourself, Major McCullough, I cannot tell you!"

And again the planter paced to and fro, wringing his hands, while great drops of sweat came out upon his face and forehead.

"Shall I prepare the men for a start, sir?" asked the officer next in command.

"No, sir—let them rest for the present; I will let you know when to sound the saddle call!" said the major to the officer, who saluted and retired.

"Major, for years I have been hugging shame to my bosom!" said Mr. Delorme, halting suddenly, in front of the Ranger.

The latter looked him in the face with wonder; for he really believed him to be insane—that he had become crazed with trouble.

"Yes, I have been worshipping the serpent which has fed upon my vitals—have been blessing the hand that was defiling me!" continued the planter.

"All that you say to me, sir, is as incomprehensible as a riddle."

"True, major, true! You have not heard the confession of the villain Malerson—he is beyond recovery, and in his ravings has told a tale that has set my very brain on fire! Poor Paul—he is coming this way—he will tell you all; I must go and see the woman who has borne my name!"

The planter hastened away, as Paul, with eyes downcast, but in a state of agitation fully as great as that of Mr. Delorme, came from the direction of the guard-house, and ap-

proached the spot where McCullough stood. The young man passed so close to Ada, that she could have reached out her hand and touched him, had she so desired. He looked so utterly miserable, that an expression of pity came over her face, in spite of her openly expressed hatred of him.

"What is the matter, Master Paul—you and Mr. Delorme act as if you seen a ghost, or been lookin' old Death in the face! What is the matter with you both?"

"Do not ask me, major—do not ask me!" said Paul, with a shudder; and when he raised his eyes to the view of the major, the latter started, he looked so utterly miserable.

"Well, I'd like to know what is the matter—I don't think a friend, such as I have proved myself, should be treated in this way!" said the major impatiently.

"Forgive me, sir—it is hard to be the herald of my own shame—ask Mr. Delorme!" said Paul, and he passed into the house.

"Well, this beats all that I've heard of, lately—they must be crazy, by the way they act!" said the major. "Mr. Delorme has ever held the best of characters, yet he talks of shame and disgrace, and here the young one is running on the same trail. I hate mysteries, and one there is here which I can't see into, no way. I believe I'll go and see the old rascal Malerson—he may have something to do with the matter! Will you go along, Miss Ada?"

"Yes, major."

CHAPTER LVIII.

When Mr. Delorme left the major, he proceeded directly to the apartment where Mrs. Delorme lay, very ill. He looked upon her pale face, so written over with the lines of misery, for a few moments, and then turning to the attendants, bade them leave the room, saying that he would sit with his lady for a little while. His tone was very quiet and calm when he spoke to them; but his pale face, sunken eyes, and quivering lips did not denote a quiet mind by any means.

Mrs. Delorme saw, evidently, that there was a storm within his breast; and, pale as snow, and calm as death, she waited for it.

"Madam, John Malerson is dying—he will not live an hour longer, the surgeon says!" said Mr. Delorme, looking her fixedly in the eye.

"I am glad to hear it!" she replied, quietly.

"You take the news very coolly, madam, considering the relation in which he stands toward you!"

The lady colored slightly, but made no reply.

"Had I known of it before, his visit to you last night should not have been interrupted," said the planter, in a sarcastic way.

"You forget, sir, that I called for help to arrest the audacious intruder."

"The intrusion of a husband should not be considered audacious," said Mr. Delorme, with a sneer.

The rising color fled from the face of the wretched lady, and she sunk back with a low groan upon her pillow.

"You see that I know, all, madam—all; that John Malerson is your lawful husband, and Paul—poor Paul!—your child."

"No, sir; you do not know all; but you shall know it. Let John Malerson be brought here, and, if he dare, deny what you must and shall know. I have a story to tell of a young, warm-hearted, and foolishly susceptible girl won away from a boarding-school in a far-away Northern city, in Troy, by the deceit and flattery of a villain—married to him but a few weeks, when she found that he was, instead of the noble, wealthy, and gifted man who had been the idol of her young dreams, a gambler, a thief, and a villain! From him she fled away with disgust and horror—fled far away to a Southern land, hoping never to hear from him again, fearing even to let her own relatives know where she was. In a few months, a child was born. It was all that she had on earth to love, and she clung to it with a mother's yearning affection, until it was of an age when she feared it would inquire after its father; and then she sent it to a seminary as her nephew, where she procured for it every care that a mother's heart could dictate. In the meantime, she heard that the wretch who had deceived her so basely had been murdered in a drunken affray, and she felt with joy that she was free from him, at least. And

she tent to her cheerfully assumed task of music-teaching with new nerve; for she worked for an honest support for herself, and to educate her boy. No one could breathe a calumnious breath against her: she had erred once in marrying a villain whom she did not know; but she never, to her knowledge, erred again. The ever-censorious world could cast no stain upon her fame: it was spotless. She was called beautiful; she was accomplished, and to a degree attractive. Many were drawn to her side, and she had more than one offer of marriage from the young, the gay, the gifted, the wealthy. For a long time, she repelled all advances, refused every offer. But at last one came who seemed to possess every attribute that could win a woman's heart. She tried not to love him; for she felt in her heart that she had been dishonored by her marriage, innocent though she had been. She refused this suitor, even though she loved him. But he pressed his suit; and then a mother's love and reason conquered all her prejudices, all her scruples. Her suitor was wealthy, lived far away from the place of her birth, would never know her sad history; and, if she wedded him, her son—supposed to be her nephew—would have a home, become educated, and perhaps, in time, succeed to wealth, and fill a proud and noble station. The temptation was too great; she could not resist it; and she married him who would not be refused. For years they were happy—too happy; for a more tender, affectionate husband never lived. But, alas! in an evil hour, through her son—whom she had, in her folly, permitted to bear his father's name, as she had done (for she was not so proficient in crime as to know how to assume an alias)—the first husband, who had not been slain, made his appearance. Terrified to death, instead of confessing all, and throwing herself upon the generosity of her noble husband, she temporized with the wretch, who now came like a ghoul to feed upon her very life—gave him money, and plead with him to go away, and preserve her secret for the sake of her son. But the villain, after receiving his bribes, continued his persecutions, made one visit too many, received his death-wound as you say, and revealed the secret. Now, sir, you know all. Send for the wretch, or go to him, and ask him by what means and false pretences he won the hand of Harriet Fontleroy."

The unhappy woman ceased speaking. For a moment, silence reigned. Then a suppressed sob was heard; and, as she looked up, she saw Paul standing on the threshold of the door, where he had listened to her sad and mournful tale.

"My son!" she gasped.

"My noble, true-hearted mother! though all the world condemn you, I will not!" cried the young man. And he rushed to her side, and, throwing his arms around her neck, rained both tears and kisses upon her pale face.

Meanwhile, the planter stood and regarded both of them sternly and attentively. When the first paroxysm of feeling was over, he looked Paul in the eye, and asked:

"Did you know aught of this matter, sir, before you heard the confession of John Malerson?"

"No, sir; as Heaven hears me, I did not! If I had, I should not have thus long been a recipient of your bounty, but should have gone forth alone into the world to carve out a name and a fortune for myself. As it is, I shall, after I have done my duty, and aided you in recovering your daughter—not for myself, sir, but for you; for I renounce all claim to her hand—I shall, after that, sir, trouble you no more with my presence. I only hope that I shall be so happy as to fall in the coming conflict with the Indians. Mother, you must stay no longer here; I will provide for you elsewhere—if I live."

The feelings of the planter were deeply touched, his sternness melted away, and tears came out upon his pale and rigid cheek.

"Neither of you shall ever leave my roof with my consent," he said, in a voice half stifled with emotion. "Harriet, I do not blame you. Paul, I love you as if you were my own son. Your father, if I must call him such, will soon be dead; and with him shall the secret be forever buried. I never will allude to it again."

A wild and fearful shout was heard outside the door at that moment, and the next instant Malerson—who, a raving maniac, had burst away from his guard—rushed into the room.

"Who says old Jack Malerson is going to die?" he yelled. "Who says old Jack will die? It's a bloody lie! He'll never die! He's too game to die!"

With his head and face covered with blood, ghastly pale where it was not stained, his eyes wild and glaring, his hair matted and torn, he was a terrible object to look upon. Both the planter and Paul stood aghast as he staggered to the centre of the room; and Mrs. Delorme shrieked in speechless horror, and hid her head beneath the bed-clothes.

"That was Hat Fontleroy's scream!" he cried. "Hat Fontleroy!—oh, but she was a pretty gal when I found her in Troy! Have you murdered her, you old devil?"

And, as he said this, he bounded toward Mr. Delorme, who sprang aside; and the miserable wretch fell to the floor, just as Major McCullough, Ada McAlpin, and several others, entered the room in pursuit of him.

"Seize him, men, and take him back to the guard-house!" said the major to a couple of the Rangers who had entered with him.

"He'll not require a guard any more, sir," said one of the men, who took hold of him to raise him up. "He is as dead as a log."

It was true: in the fury of that last struggle life had left him.

"Take him up gently, and bear him out. He was a bad man, but he shall have decent burial," said Mr. Delorme, with a trembling voice.

The Rangers obeyed, and the remains of the wretched man were taken from the room. Major McCullough and Ada also went out, leaving only Mr. Delorme and Paul in the room.

"Harriet," said the planter, in a more kind and gentle tone than he had used toward her for weeks, "Harriet, death has freed you from him at last. Look up; we will yet be happy!"

There was no reply—not even a motion of the snowy counterpane, which, in her terror, she had drawn over her head. Both Paul and himself seemed at the same instant to divine what caused her silence; and a low cry of horror broke from their lips as they raised the sheets from over her face.

She was indeed free—free from all the ills and persecutions of this world—free from life and its miseries!

CHAPTER LIX.

Of course, under these terrible circumstances, the march of McCullough and his Rangers was delayed. The dead were to be buried—the bereaved to have time to calm their feelings.

The body of Malerson was put in a coffin and buried decently; but no mourner followed it to the grave. But it was different with Mrs. Delorme: her remains were interred with all the show which persons of her position generally receive; and two there were who followed her coffin with sad and sorrowful hearts.

Although Paul had never for a moment supposed that she was other than his aunt until the recent *denouement*, he had always received more than a mother's care from her; he had never had cause to miss a mother's love.

The sad ceremonies of the day were over, and Mr. Delorme and Paul were alone in the deserted chamber so lately occupied by the wife and mother.

"Do not grieve, Paul, my son!" said Mr. Delorme. "This bereavement only renders you more dear to me! In future, whether we recover poor Stella or not, I shall regard you as a son. Do not grieve for the loss of your mother; she will be happier in another world than she was in this, or would have been had she lived."

"I know that it is weak and unmanly in me to grieve, sir," said Paul, in reply; "but if I loved her so much while I believed her to be only my aunt, how much more would I have loved her as a mother!"

"True, my good boy; but it is useless to weep for the dead—tears will not recall them, sighs will not reach their ears!"

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Major McCullough.

"Well, the 'Free Rangers,' as they term themselves, are off!" said he, as he came in. "I have just left them all in high glee, and as careless about their late captain's death as such wretches generally are."

"I am glad they are gone—that is, if they'll stay away!" said Mr. Delorme.

"There is no danger but what they will," said the major. "They know what will be the penalty if they return, and that I will as surely execute it as I live, if I see one of their faces on my range again. What they do among the Mexicans I care not. I owe the whole cowardly nation a grudge, and wish the angel of death would sweep over it every day! But, Master Paul, I had nearly forgotten that I have a letter for you!"

"From whom?" asked Paul, as he took the letter.

"From one who has some good left in her heart, in spite of her position and recent conduct!" said the major. "Read the letter—I do not know its contents; but from her conversation, I do not think she has written anything to wound your feelings, for she seemed to feel deeply when I explained all your last trouble and your bereavement."

Paul opened the letter and read its contents, which belong to the reader:

"Paul Malerson, you are now in such deep sorrow, such overwhelming trouble, that I pity you, and feel that I can forego my intended revenge."

"You have wronged a fond heart which would have bled to death for you without a murmur; but of that, no more. I do not write to reproach you—you will reproach yourself when even you think of me, my desperation, my dark, unhappy future. I took up my pen only to say farewell. I will add other words—I forgive you; may you yet be happy! Farewell!"

ADA.

The young man read it and sighed, and put it in his pocket, but made no remark whatever.

"When will you be ready to take the field—or would it not be preferable for you and Paul to stay at home, instead of going on this expedition?" said the major to Mr. Delorme.

"We will go to-morrow morning!" said Mr. Delorme, firmly. "He looks for a bride, I for a daughter; we would indeed be dastards to stay at home while others periled their lives upon business which so nearly and dearly interests us! We will be fully prepared for the march when the new day dawns. It will help to take our thoughts away from sad memories here. The excitement of the field is needed by both of us, and will be our best medicine!"

"I am glad to hear you say so, sir; for those who give way to grief only hurt themselves and do no good. My men are all prepared, and eagerly anxious to see work, and as surely as I live, they shall not be disappointed."

"Do you think that you can find their trail, or at least follow it from the spot where we last saw Stella?"

"Yes, if they went in a body—as with their numbers they probably did fearlessly."

"A package for Major McCullough," said a strange messenger, with the dust and sweat of travel on his brow, and he handed a sealed packet to the Ranger.

The latter opened it, and a splendid diamond ring met his eye. Upon a slip of paper were written these words:

"Please wear this in memory of one who will never forget you, though she may see you no more; for you have spoken kind, brave words to her, and they are planted in her heart."

ADA.

The major put the ring upon his finger and placed the paper carefully away in an old and well-worn pocket-book, then turned to speak to the messenger, but he was gone.

"There is a good heart in that girl, no matter what she has been, or is, or may be!" said the major, in a tone which trembled with feeling. "In a good cause, she would be a star—in a bad one she will be the devil I'm afraid; for she is bold in her courage, cool, full of expedients, as she has already proven, and has a power of command which few leaders possess. She keeps that gang of cut-throats as obedient as whipped dogs. They fear her; and with that class, to fear is to respect."

The major had said this much aloud, without thinking that Mr. Delorme and Paul were standing by and listening to the thoughts which he only muttered to himself. Blushing like a girl caught in the act of returning a lover's kiss, he ceased to speak, and turning on his heel, said:

"The saddle-call will be sounded at daylight in the morning, gentlemen."

CHAPTER LX.

It was the dawn of another day; the rosy herald-rays of the rising sun were shooting up the cold, blue side of the eastern sky; and the bugles of the Rangers were sounding the

ever-cheering call of "Boots and Saddles."

And then came a murmur of many voices, a trampling and neighing of fiery steeds, a clattering of arms and steel-shod hoofs, and all the sounds of a gathering force of men at arms.

The sun came up, red and round in the cloudless sky, and its bright rays fell upon the long line of mounted volunteers, which was drawn up before the mansion of Mr. Delorme to be inspected, ere they received the orders to ride on from their brave and experienced leader.

He, accompanied by Mr. Delorme and Paul, was riding along the line, all of them splendidly mounted upon blooded horses, when a shout from the extreme left of the line attracted their attention toward the gate.

"Heavens! it is Lagona; and a female is with him! It must be Stella!" cried Mr. Delorme, as he recognized the famous white horse of Lagona, and the same coal-black steed upon which Stella had been rescued at first from the Lipans.

"It is him, as sure as twice ten makes twenty!" said the major, reining in his horse.

"Stella—my Stella!" murmured Paul, and he turned pale, and seemed hardly able to sit upon his horse.

It was but a moment before Lagona and Stella had reached the front of the house. Leaping from his horse, he lifted Stella from hers, and placed her upon the piazza, where, in a moment more, she was in the arms of her father and Paul, who, with tears of joy and a thousand kisses, and almost incoherent exclamations, welcomed her as one who had sprung from the grave.

Meanwhile, stern, calm, with a sad dignity, which made him look more than mortal, Lagona stood and looked upon her joy and that of those to whose arms he had restored her.

Never before, since in these pages we have seen and described him, had he looked so noble. His dress was plain—only the eagle feathers in a circlet above his lofty brow proclaimed him to be a chief and a warrior—for he bore no weapons about his person. His lance and bow had been cast aside—his knife even had been taken from his girdle.

At last, the first fever of joy over, Mr. Delorme turned to speak to Lagona. The latter looked him calmly in the eye, and spoke first.

"I have brought the flower of his heart back to the pale-faced chief!" said he.

"Yes, and for the joy which you give me this hour, I forgive the sorrow that you have heaped upon me!" said the happy father. "Had you not brought her back, we should have gone after her with many men, and blood would have run!" he added, and he pointed to the volunteer array.

"Your men might have sought for death and found it—they could not have had the White Flower without the consent of Lagona!" said the chief, haughtily.

"How can I reward Lagona?" asked the planter, not heeding the words or tone of his reply.

"Lend me that!" said the chief, touching the hilt of Mr. Delorme's keen and heavy bowie-knife, as it rested in his belt.

"Accept it, and wear it for my sake!" said the planter, handing it to him.

Lagona took it, examined its point and edge, and then descending from the piazza, approached his two noble, magnificent horses.

Before any one could divine his intentions, with two mighty blows he had driven the knife to the hilt in the hearts of each of them, and, with a sobbing groan, the noble animals sunk dead at his feet.

"God of Heaven! what did you do that for?" cried Major McCullough.

"Lagona wants to ride them, when he reaches the happy hunting-grounds of the Great Spirit. He is going there to build a lodge and lay up provisions for the White Flower, who will soon come there, for the Great Spirit will send her up to him!" said the chief.

"He means to kill himself—take the knife from him!" cried the major, leaping from his horse.

"White Flower, farewell—Lagona goes home!" said the brave, and before any one could attempt to stop him, he had driven the bloody knife deep through his heart.

For a moment he stood stiff and erect, with his eyes fixed fondly upon Stella; then, while her shriek of terror, pain, and anguish rang upon the air, he smiled, and fell dead upon the earth!

McCullough took off his cap, as he bent over the body, and said: "He was too noble and too brave to die in that way! If he was a red-skin, he was also a man!"

Reader, my story is told. You can finish it, if you want to follow Paul and Stella to church and see them married, with the usual *et-ceteras*.

THE END.

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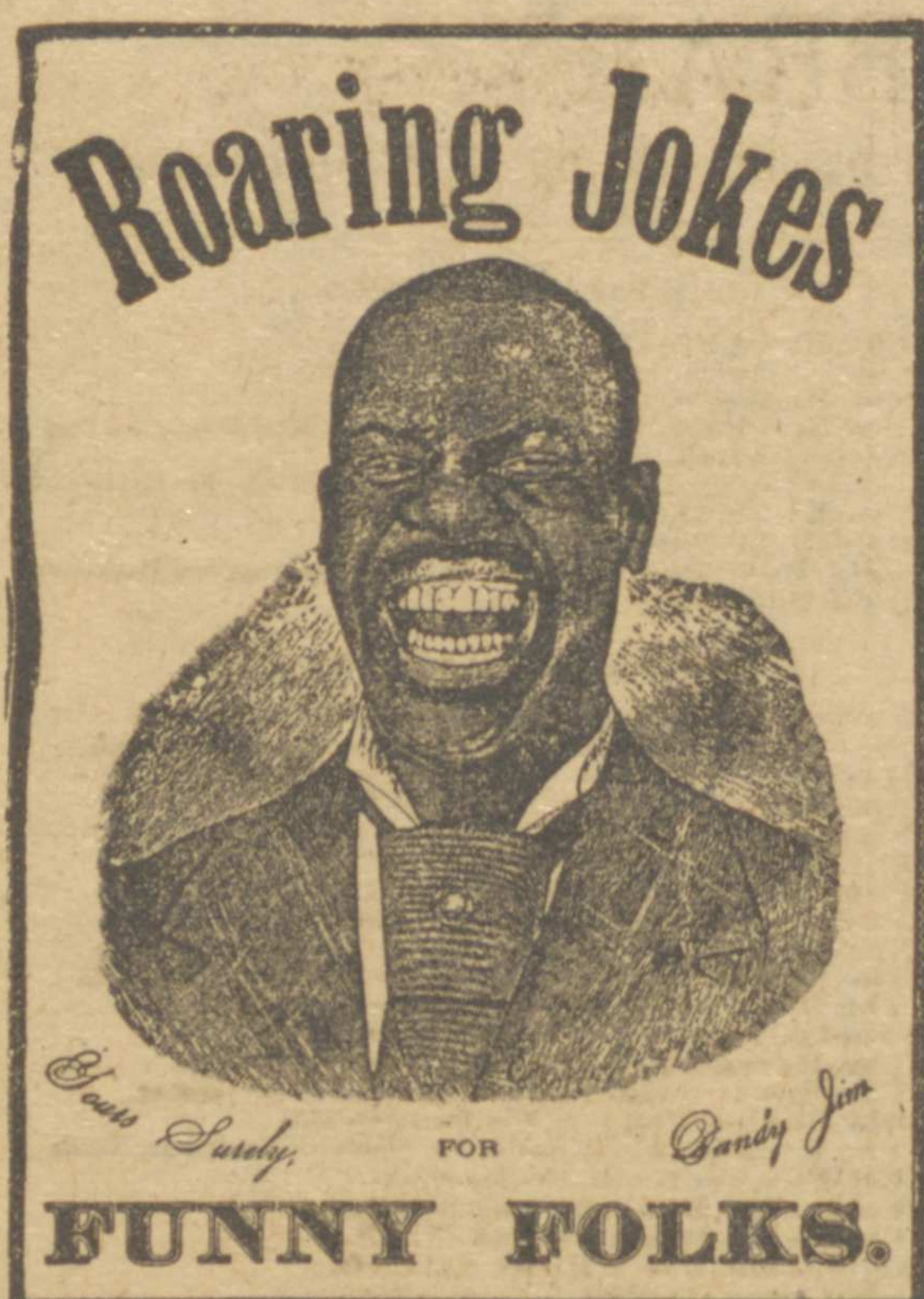
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